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**CONTEMPORARY SALAFISM AND THE RIGHTLY
GUIDED CALIPHATE: WHY IS IT EMULATED AND
WHAT WAS ITS REALITY?**

by

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December 2013

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WHY IS IT EMULATED AND WHAT WAS ITS REALITY?**

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary Salafist movement idealizes the Rightly Guided Caliphate. Given the tumultuous nature of the period and the grandeur of the Golden Age of Islam that occurred several centuries later, its veneration seems paradoxical. To explain the reality of the Rightly Guided Caliphate and the reasoning behind its emulation, this study explores both the traditional historical account and the contemporary Salafist narrative of the period. Comparative analysis indicates that the period is revered, despite the paradoxical turmoil and violence associated with it, because it is perceived as the summit of both spiritual purity and temporal power in Islamic history. Contemporary Salafists long for a resurgence of Muslim power in the world but do not want to sacrifice religious purity to obtain it. The Rightly Guided Caliphate epitomizes this notion because its earliest generation was the most pure, in terms of the practice of Islam, of any Muslim generation. In addition, its seemingly miraculous expansion signified enormous temporal power—relative to its competitors, who have since overtaken them—that is easily romanticized. Much of the period’s violence is omitted from the narrative to protect an idealized remembrance of the state’s power, not its religious unity.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	INTRODUCTION.....	1
A.	IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY	2
B.	PROBLEMS AND HYPOTHESIS	3
C.	SOURCES THAT INFORM THIS STUDY'S RESEARCH.....	5
1.	History of the Rightly Guided Caliphate.....	5
2.	The Contemporary Salafist Narrative	9
D.	METHODS AND SOURCES	14
E.	THESIS OVERVIEW	15
II.	THE REALITY OF THE RIGHTLY GUIDED CALIPHATE	17
A.	OVERVIEW	17
B.	THE SUCCESSOR: ABU BAKR.....	18
1.	Composition of the State	18
2.	Challenges Faced By the State	20
3.	The Exercise of Power	21
4.	Evolution of the State under Abu Bakr	23
C.	UMAR AND THE BIRTH OF AN EMPIRE.....	24
1.	Composition the State.....	24
2.	Challenges Faced By the State	25
3.	The Exercise of Power	26
4.	Evolution of the State under Umar	29
D.	BOILING TENSIONS AND THE TUMULTUOUS REIGN OF UTHMAN	29
1.	Composition of the State	29
2.	Challenges Faced By the State	31
3.	The Exercise of Power	32
4.	Evolution of the State under Uthman	35
E.	ALI'S ASCENSION AND THE ORIGINATION OF THE SUNNISHI'A SPLIT	36
1.	Composition of the State	36
2.	Challenges Faced By the State	37
3.	The Exercise of Power	40
4.	Evolution of the State under Ali	42
F.	SUMMARY	43
III.	CONTEMPORARY SALAFISM'S INTERPRETATION OF THE RIGHTLY GUIDED CALIPHATE.....	47
A.	INTRODUCTION.....	47
B.	THE ROOTS AND DOCTRINE OF CONTEMPORARY SALAFISM.....	47
C.	SALAFIST ORGANIZATIONS.....	50
D.	THE NARRATIVE.....	56
1.	Views on the Caliphs' and Companions' Beliefs and Actions	57

2.	Treatment of Misdeeds	58
3.	Views on the Unity of the Umma	60
4.	Perspective on the Sunni-Shi'a Rift.....	62
E.	SUMMARY	64
IV.	COMPETING ACCOUNTS	67
A.	INTRODUCTION.....	67
B.	COMMONALITIES WITHIN THE ACCOUNTS	68
C.	MAJOR DISPARITIES	70
D.	SUMMARY	72
V.	CONCLUSION	75
A.	SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH CONDUCTED	75
B.	RECOMMENDATIONS.....	77
LIST OF REFERENCES		81
INITIAL DISTRIBUTION LIST		85

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I. INTRODUCTION

Since its emergence in the late nineteenth century, Salafism has significantly influenced modern Islamic thought, and by extension, the Muslim world's interaction with the West. As an ideology, Salafism explains that the religious, social, and political divisions that occurred within Islam after its formative period are the consequences of straying from the Qur'an and the teachings and actions of the Prophet as they were interpreted by his companions.¹ Contemporary Salafists believe that the only way to correct these problems is to *purify* Muslim society by harkening back to this formative period and reviving a form of Islam based solely on this early interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunna.²

Contemporary Salafism is not a monolith. It has undergone a significant transformation in recent years, evolving from a completely apolitical movement into one with active and successful political parties. Its ideology has been adopted by and influenced the development of many different groups, both political and violent, who seek to achieve this purification. Regardless of their chosen means to attain this goal, all contemporary Salafists share an important characteristic: they emulate the formative period of Islam—including the significantly tumultuous Rightly Guided Caliphate period.³ The question at hand is why; a dispassionate study of the Rightly Guided Caliphate indicates significant religious and political turmoil, highlighted by the assassination of three of the four ruling caliphs, intense fighting amongst the Prophet's companions, and the origination of the sectarian divide between Sunni and Shi'a. To address these issues, this study poses the following research question: why do contemporary Salafists view the formative period of Islam, including the Rightly Guided Caliphate, as an ideal worth emulating, and what was the reality of the Rightly Guided Caliphate?

¹ Mohammed Ayoob, *The Many Faces of Political Islam* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 6–8.

² Ibid.; John Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 160.

³ Ayoob, *Political Islam*, 7.

A. IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

For today's national security professionals, the contemporary operating environment poses tremendous challenges. The bipolar international order characteristic of the Cold War has been replaced by what our National Security Strategy defines as a "multi-modal world" influenced by "shifting, interest-driven coalitions" and "challenged by [both] state and non-state actors."⁴ Those responsible for national security planning, coordination, and execution alike, no matter what their specific roles may be, must now confront a wider array of challenges including terrorism, insurgency, crime, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and other asymmetric threats, sometimes concurrent with high intensity conflict. They must also work within a multi-dimensional environment that requires a greater appreciation of complex human terrain, a burgeoning cyber domain, and the global effects of rapid technological change. It is within this environment that national security professionals must thrive, but like their Cold War predecessors, many are guilty of oversimplifying concepts they choose not to understand. Time and policy errors revealed that international communism was not a monolith, despite deeply-held American beliefs to the contrary that persisted for decades. The fear and misunderstanding of Islamist movements that is prevalent among today's national security professionals is reminiscent of this earlier era and requires a similar revelation.

Because the concept of Islamism takes on so many forms—it is at once "an ideology, a movement-organization, and a form of government"⁵—its meaning is very difficult to understand. Further compounding this challenge is the variance of methods that the various Islamist groups use to achieve their goals, which range from peaceful political activism to unabashed violence. This complex problem has led many security professionals to adopt an orientalist-like eagerness to generalize every appearance of Islamism as a manifestation of radical ideology that poses a threat to national security in

⁴ National Military Strategy of the United States of America, Joint Chiefs of Staff Library, U.S. Department of Defense, February 8, 2011, http://www.jcs.mil//content/files/2011-02/020811084800_2011_nms_-08_feb_2011.pdf, 2–4.

⁵ Mehdi Mozaffari, "What is Islamism? History and Definition of a Concept," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 8, no. 1 (March 2007): 17–18, 27, https://pure.au.dk/portal/files/22326292/What_is_Islamism_Totalitarian_Movements_article.pdf.

some way.⁶ Breaking this trend of oversimplification is of paramount importance to developing an effective understanding of the variance between different Islamist movements. This study focuses on one such movement, contemporary Salafism, in an effort to better understand its history, motivations, and objectives. Since contemporary Salafists assign a fundamental importance to the formative period of Islam, which includes the Rightly Guided Caliphate, a detailed study of this period and the Salafists' interpretation of provides these insights. A better understanding of contemporary Salafism can enable greater effectiveness when dealing with both political and violent Salafist and Salafism-inspired organizations.

B. PROBLEMS AND HYPOTHESIS

As mentioned earlier, the major problem addressed by this study is characterized by a two-part research question: why do contemporary Salafists view the formative period of Islam, including the Rightly Guided Caliphate, as an ideal worth emulating, and what was the reality of the Rightly Guided Caliphate? The nature of the problem requires the research question to be dissected into two parts because an effective analysis of what the Rightly Guided Caliphate means to contemporary Salafists first requires a dispassionate explanation of its true nature. Addressing a number of foundational questions helps answer this study's research question.

The best way to approach the question about the true nature of the Rightly Guided Caliphate is to analyze the reigns of each of its four caliphs to determine the composition, function, and evolution of the caliphate during the period. This requires an understanding of the subjects the caliphate governed, the challenges each caliph faced, the methods used to overcome those challenges and maintain governance, and the ways in which the caliphate changed during the period. Of special interest are the circumstances surrounding the reign of the fourth caliph, Ali ibn Abi Talib, as it was during this period that the conflict between the Prophet's companions intensified, eventually leading to

⁶ Ibid.; Ayoob, *Political Islam*, 1; Patrick Porter, *Military Orientalism: Eastern War through Western Eyes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 54; Meghana Nayak and Christopher Malone, "American Orientalism and American Exceptionalism: A Critical Rethinking of US Hegemony," *International Studies Review* 11, no. 2 (2009), 253–54, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1468-2486.2009.000848.x/pdf>.

Ali's death. This laid the foundation for the subsequent—and ultimately enduring—rift between Sunni and Shi'a. Since many contemporary Salafists deride Shi'ism as both an aberration and threat to Islam, an understanding of the circumstances surrounding Ali's reign is especially important to this study.⁷ To best understand the reality of the Rightly Guided Caliphate period, three themes are examined in detail. The first is that the Rightly Guided Caliphs faced significant challenges in defining their roles and responsibilities and adapting them to meet the challenges of the times. The second is that they maintained control over elite factions within Mecca and Medina and the restive Arab tribal groups that formed the core of its state posed another major challenge. Finally, the third theme is the caliphs' strategy of mitigating the restiveness of these groups by channeling their energies into conquests that eventually created larger challenges which stretched the ability of the caliphs to wield both political and religious authority. These themes underscore this study's first major hypothesis: the tremendous turmoil that marked the Rightly Guided Caliphate period was a function of the political challenges each caliph faced, and the nature of these challenges drove them to respond in ways that do not appear to be consistent with the actions and teachings of the Prophet.

By establishing the first three generations of Islam as the definitive model for Muslims to emulate (the end of which is typically marked by the death of Ahmad ibn Hanbal in 855), contemporary Salafists reject the interpretation of theological schools that followed this period and oppose the “blind following of the four canonical *law* schools [emphasis added]”⁸ as well.⁹ Given the chaotic nature of the Rightly Guided Caliphate, the behavior of its four caliphs, and the grandeur of the Golden Age of Islam that occurred several centuries later, the Rightly Guided Caliphate period appears to be an

⁷ Guido Steinberg, “Jihadi Salafism and the Shi'is: Remarks about the Intellectual Roots of anti-Shi'ism,” in *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, ed. Roel Meijer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 107–8, 114–15; Christopher Blanchard, *Al Qaeda: Statements and Evolving Ideology* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2007), 8.

⁸ Roel Meijer, *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 4.

⁹ Bernard Haykel, “On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action,” in *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, ed. Roel Meijer (33–57) (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 38–39; Adis Duderija, “Islamic Groups and their World-views and Identities: Neo-Traditional Salafis and Progressive Muslims,” *Arab Law Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (2007), 350–52, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27650599>.

illogical one to emulate. This apparent paradox makes an analysis of the contemporary Salafist narrative of the period so important. To achieve this, three aspects of the narrative are studied. First, the narrative's treatment of the beliefs and actions of the Rightly Guided Caliphs and other leaders during the period, particularly the positive ones, are analyzed. Second, the question of whether the narrative acknowledges any misdeeds of the companions is addressed, and if misdeeds are indeed acknowledged, their explanations are studied. Third, the overall contemporary Salafist perception of the unity of the community of believers (or *umma*) during the Rightly Guided Caliphate period is examined. The answers to these essential questions underscore this study's second major hypothesis: contemporary Salafists ignore the negative aspects of the Rightly Guided Caliphate because they are prejudiced by a desire to reinvent the period in a way that better supports their religious and political objectives.

C. SOURCES THAT INFORM THIS STUDY'S RESEARCH

The two-part nature of this study's research question requires an analysis of two distinct perspectives of the Rightly Guided Caliphate period: the traditional historical viewpoint and the contemporary Salafist narrative. To capture the traditional historical perspective of the period, this study examines the arguments posed by prominent early Islamic historians M. A. Shaban, Hugh Kennedy, J. J. Saunders, and Patricia Crone. To understand the context of the contemporary Salafist narrative, the history, doctrine, and organization of the movement is derived from the works of John Esposito and Quintan Wiktorowicz. Finally, the actual substance of the narrative is examined through a survey of the writings of several prominent Salafi leaders from the purist, political activist, and jihadi camps, including Mohammad Nasiruddin al-Albani, Aziz bin Baz, Safar al-Hawali, Osama bin Laden, and Ayman al-Zawahiri.

1. History of the Rightly Guided Caliphate

In *Islamic History A.D. 600-750 (A.H. 132): A New Interpretation*, M. A. Shaban recounted that the four rulers of the Rightly Guided Caliphate faced a number of significant challenges, which elicited various responses and influenced the true nature of the period. The first challenge discussed by the author was the fundamental problem of

defining and redefining the actual role and responsibilities of the post of caliph. Shaban recounted how Abu Bakr transformed the post from a part time position to one with modest political and religious power; how Umar ibn al-Kattab, recognizing that the limits to caliphal power made effective governance challenging, may have considered abolishing the post; how accusations that Uthman ibn Affan usurped too much authority helped bring about his assassination; and how Ali ibn Abi Talib's interpretation of caliphal powers served as a pretext for his enemies to attack him.¹⁰ The second caliphal challenge Shaban described was the importance of maintaining harmony among the prominent factions of the state's core—namely the families of Mecca and Medina—on the issues of political power and financial wealth distribution.¹¹ The author reported how each caliph's assumption and retention of power was affected by his ability to overcome this set of problems. The third challenge discussed by Shaban involved the restiveness of the Bedouin Arab tribes. He recounted how each caliph's ability to deal with this factor led to the reunification of the state after an early secession crisis; fueled the conquests that expanded the state into Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Iran; and provided a measure of security against external invasion along the state's periphery.¹²

In *The Great Arab Conquests: How the Spread of Islam Changed the World We Live In*, Hugh Kennedy discussed how the early caliphate escaped a near collapse, arose from the ashes of a broken confederation, and transformed into an empire encompassing most of Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and the Arabian Peninsula by the end of the fourth caliph's rule. Of particular relevance to this study is Kennedy's emphasis on the fragility of the new state and discussion of how Abu Bakr's efforts to subdue the seceding tribes after Mohammad's death defined the nature of the caliph's dual political and religious leadership role. To explain the fragility of the state, Kennedy described how the problem of succession after Mohammad's death almost resulted in the state's collapse. He asserted that Mohammad's failure to name a successor required that his companions not only make a politically-charged decision about who the new leader would be, but also

¹⁰ M. A. Shaban, *Islamic History, A.D. 600-750 (A.H. 132): A New Interpretation* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 19, 56, 60, 70–71, 73, 77.

¹¹ Ibid., 18, 62, 66–67, 70–74.

¹² Ibid., 23–26, 28, 66–67, 74.

that they must define his role, since Mohammad had been very clear that he was the last (or *seal*) of the Prophets.¹³ Through what the author termed a “coup d’état,”¹⁴ Umar’s support of Abu Bakr as the Prophet’s successor at once mitigated a factional dispute between Medina and the prominent Meccan Quraysh tribe and solidified the idea that there would be only one leader—with both religious and political power—of the young Muslim state.¹⁵ Second, Kennedy’s account of how Abu Bakr subdued those peripheral Arab Bedouin tribes that had seceded following the death of the Prophet (while indicating their willingness to continue to practice Islam) described a further strengthening of the caliph’s position and definition of the community as belonging solely to his state.¹⁶

J. J. Saunders’s *A History of Medieval Islam* is of significant value to this study as it provides a greater amount of detail, largely through anecdotes, about the personal qualities of each of the four Rightly Guided Caliphs than is found in the two previously discussed sources. Regarding Abu Bakr, the author highlighted several points. He discussed the lenience with which the first caliph treated the Bedouin separatists after they were reintegrated into the fledgling state, the restraint he exhibited by admonishing his Islamic fighters not to harm defenseless people who capitulated in battle, the wisdom he exhibited in choosing a successor when he died, and his gentle but firm character that preserved and strengthened the state.¹⁷

Umar was described by Saunders as a humble man who, without the benefit of belonging to an elite family or owning the reputation of military prowess, was able to make “his mark by sheer force of will, shrewd judgment of men and motives, and political acumen.”¹⁸ The author recounted that under Umar’s reign, the caliphate assumed a more secular and military character.¹⁹ In addition to these positive notes,

¹³ Hugh Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests: How the Spread of Islam Changed the World We Live In* (London: Orion Publishing, 2007), 54–55.

¹⁴ Ibid., 54.

¹⁵ Ibid., 54–55.

¹⁶ Ibid., 55–57, 63.

¹⁷ J. J. Saunders, *A History of Medieval Islam* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), 43–44.

¹⁸ Ibid., 45, 47, 57.

¹⁹ Ibid., 45.

however, the author levied criticism of Umar's decision to destroy, rather than defeat, the Sassanids, which only further escalated the level of animosity between the two civilizations.²⁰

About Uthman, Saunders's description was rather unforgiving. He recounted that Uthman was a deeply pious man, but observed that he was, at best, an incompetent and unwise ruler and at worst, a significantly corrupt and nepotistic one.²¹ Saunders discussed how Uthman's appointment of family members to important posts, mismanagement of the state's finances, and decision to standardize the Qur'an in a single version caused him to lose support from most of his constituents, including some of the Prophet's closest companions.²² This lack of support eventually contributed to Uthman's assassination.²³ The last Rightly Guided Caliph, Ali, was described by the author as exceptionally pious, morally upstanding, and fiercely loyal, but also as the subject of ridicule for his heavy weight and uncomely countenance.²⁴ Saunders recounted how Ali appeared extremely indecisive and unstatesmanlike through his inaction against the murderers of his predecessor and his loss of control of his coalition after being challenged by Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan for leadership of the Islamic state.²⁵

Patricia Crone, in *God's Rule—Government and Islam: Six Centuries of Medieval Islamic Political Thought*, placed heavy emphasis on the religious aspect of the Rightly Guided Caliphs' power with three main points. First, like Shaban and Kennedy, Crone recounted how Abu Bakr inherited the reigns of the Islamic state without the status of prophethood and with little guidance for what his role should be, so he defined it.²⁶ She noted that Abu Bakr eventually selected the title caliph (or *deputy*) to reflect his

²⁰ Ibid., 56.

²¹ Ibid., 61-63.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 67.

²⁵ Ibid., 63-64.

²⁶ Patricia Crone, *God's Rule—Government and Islam: Six Centuries of Medieval Islamic Political Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 18.

subservience to God and the Prophet.²⁷ Second, the author explained that possessing good religious leadership was of critical importance to the Muslim community because Mohammad had taught them that being devoid of such leadership was akin to not being saved. For the early community of believers, having a caliph was necessary not only for religious leadership but for salvation, and the controversy over whether Ali or Mu’awiya was the rightful caliph presented a dilemma for all Muslims as they feared a wrong choice could have consequences in the afterlife.²⁸ Crone’s third point underscoring the importance of religion within the caliphate was the early Muslims’ belief that good governance was epitomized by the use of force and violence in a manner that was justifiable by God.²⁹

The study of these important historical sources finds two key themes that persisted during the Rightly Guided Caliphate period. First, while religious unity was prevalent throughout the time, the political unity of the caliphate was perpetually threatened by factionalism and self-interest, as manifested in the numerous disputes between companions that sometimes erupted in violence. Second, to adequately deal with the challenge of governing the burgeoning empire, the caliphs were faced with the necessity of exerting a greater amount of political (and sometimes religious) control. These efforts were resisted on numerous levels, creating even more discord between its various factions.

2. The Contemporary Salafist Narrative

To understand the roots, doctrine, and composition of the contemporary Salafist movement, this study examines John Esposito’s *Islam: The Straight Path*. Though fundamentally different in many ways, contemporary Salafists trace their history back to the emergence of the modern Salafist movement in the late 1800s. Esposito explained how the earlier movement sought to reverse the perceived decline of Islamic society relative to the West through reform and purification. Its earliest leaders, Jamal al-Din al-

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 20–21.

²⁹ Ibid., 8, 318–20.

Afghani and Mohammad Abduh, advocated a reinterpretation of key aspects of Islam that would enable it to regain its relevance in the modern world. Esposito explained that while al-Afghani and Abduh believed the core principles of Islam were unchangeable, the method by which those principles were employed needed to be reexamined—including the abandonment of the tradition aversion to the use of reason. Esposito also explained how the movement changed into a form more reminiscent of today's contemporary Salafists under the direction of Rashid Rida. Rida was highly skeptical of Western influence and believed that Islam could solve the world's problems without the reinterpretation advocated by his predecessors. He also feared that the use of reason and other Western practices would lead to a secularization of Islam that would undermine it from within. These leaders are significant today because most contemporary Salafists embrace Rida's beliefs, while holding onto al-Afghani and Abduh's reverence for the core principles of Islam and desire to purify society.³⁰

Though the contemporary Salafist movement is extremely diverse and consists of many different groups with different ambitions, each of these groups share a common creed. Quintan Wiktorowicz discussed both the movement's creed and its internal factions at length in his “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement.” He described the various Salafi groups as belonging to one of three different categories based on their respective understandings of contemporary problems and interpretations of how to best apply Islam to these problems.³¹ These include the “purists,” who emphasize nonviolent means such as example and education to purify society; the “politicos,” who engage in politics to bring the tenets of Salafism to society; and “jihadis,” who use violence to impose this creed on others.³² Despite their differences in methods, the author argued that each group shares the same religious creed (or *aqida*), which centers upon the belief in the oneness (or *tawhid*) of God.³³ He explained that tawhid entails an acceptance that there

³⁰ Esposito, *Islam*, 154–58, 160.

³¹ Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29 (2006): 208, http://www.cerium.ca/IMG/pdf/WIKTOROWICZ_2006_Anatomy_of_the_Salafi_Movement.pdf.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

is only one God, Allah; that God is unique and does not share power with any aspect of his creation; and that only God is worthy of worship.³⁴ Wiktorowicz added that Contemporary Salafists not only share a belief in these principles, but agree that a strict adherence to the Qur'an and the Sunna (as observed by the companions of the Prophet) is necessary to avoid straying from the true path of Islam through actions called innovations (or *bid'a*).³⁵ According to the author, this places a tremendous importance on the hadith, "perhaps even more important to Salafis than the Qur'an itself," because of the difficulty of applying the rather ambiguous passages of the Qur'an to modern problems.³⁶ Since the hadiths are composed of the observations of those closest to the Prophet, the companions represent a tremendously important link to Mohammad for contemporary Salafists of all stripes.

The actual substance of the contemporary Salafist narrative was derived from the works of several of the movement's most prominent leaders. To understand the purist Salafist perspective, this study examines the writings of Mohammad Nasiruddin al-Albani and Aziz bin Baz. In "The Hadith is Proof Itself in Belief and Laws," al-Albani reinforced the importance of the first generation of Muslims (the *Salaf*) as observers of the Prophet's life and actions, explained that the hadith is equal in value to the Qur'an because God's word cannot be properly understood without the Prophet's interpretation, and discussed the zealous manner in which the companions protected the sanctity of the Sunna.³⁷ In "The Sacred Salafee Methodology," he discussed many topics of relevance to this study including the strong unity of the umma, the companions' concurrence on the fundamentals of Islam, the necessity of following the actions of the Prophet and his companions for salvation, Mohammad's prediction that the umma would split, and the deviance of the Kharijites.³⁸ In "Fataawaa of Shaikh Al-Albaanee (Rahimahullaah)," he

³⁴ Ibid., 208–9.

³⁵ Ibid., 209.

³⁶ Ibid., 214.

³⁷ Mohammad Nasiruddin al-Albani, *The Hadith is Proof Itself in Belief and Laws* (Miami: Daar of Islamic Heritage, 1995), 9–10, 14.

³⁸ Mohammad Nasiruddin al-Albani, "The Sacred Salafee Methodology," trans. Umar Salim, AbdurRahman Media, accessed September 8, 2013, <http://abdurrahman.org/sunnah/sacredsalafimethod.html>.

further reinforced the devotion and purity of the Salaf and described how they, as a whole, were infallible, but as individuals were not.³⁹

Three selections from bin Baz provide insight into the contemporary Salafist perspective on the Rightly Guided Caliphate period. In “Knowledge,” he discussed the importance of the companions as being the most knowledgeable and authentic in religious practice of any Muslim generation due to their nearness to the Prophet and their devotion to the Qur'an and Sunna.⁴⁰ He also recounted that the companions had disagreements but those disagreements did not contradict their devotion to God and to the way of life they learned from Mohammad.⁴¹ In “The Authentic Creed and the Invalidators of Islam,” he discussed how the companions are to be revered not only because the Prophet himself commanded it but also because they understood the true nature of God and did not innovate.⁴² He also discussed that the companions, unlike the Shi'a who later derided and blasphemed them, always tried to do what was right.⁴³ In “The Advice of Shaykhul-Islaam Ibn Baaz (D. 1420H) to Usaamah Ibn Laadin Al-Khaarijee,” he reinforced the dangers of intra-Muslim violence and rebellion against legitimate rulers by describing how the beloved companion Usama ibn Zaid disagreed with the caliph Uthman but did not openly disparage him and by discussing the damaging effects of the Kharijites, whom bin Baz blamed for the murder of Uthman and the subsequent conflict between Ali and Mu'awiyah.⁴⁴

The works of political activist Safar al-Hawali are surveyed to understand the nuances of the politico Salafist faction. His work “When the Ummah Deviated from the

³⁹ Isma'eel Alarcon, *Fataawaa of Shaikh Al-Albaanee (Rahimahullaah)* (Richmond Hill, NY: Al-Manhaj E-Books, 2001), http://islamic-knowledge.com/Books_Articles/Fatawa_Sh_Al_Albani_iisc_ca.pdf, 20, 23–24, 26.

⁴⁰ Aziz bin Baz, “Knowledge,” trans. Muhammad Iqbal, AbdurRahman Media, accessed September 8, 2013, <http://abdurrahman.org/knowledge/knowledgebaaz.pdf>, 15.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Aziz bin Baz, “The Authentic Creed and the Invalidators of Islam,” trans. Abu Hamzah, AbdurRahman Media, accessed September 8, 2013, <http://abdurrahman.org/faith/autehnticcreedinvalidators.html>, 7–8, 19.

⁴³ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁴ Aziz bin Baz, “The Advice of Shaykhul-Islaam Ibn Baaz (D. 1420H) to Usaamah Ibn Laadin al-Khaarijee,” trans. Maaz Qureshi, AbdurRahman Media, accessed September 8, 2013, <http://abdurrahman.org/jihad/binlaadin.pdf>, 2, 8.

Actions of the Heart” is relevant to this study because its central theme was the nature of the companions, which he discussed at length. In this treatise, he provides a portrait of the companions as being extremely knowledgeable, pure in their practice of Islam and treatment of others, tremendously devoted to God, and free of any intention to innovate. He explained that innovation was a practice that came after the first generation of Muslims and he admonished us to reject innovation and return to the pure practices observed by the companions.⁴⁵

The writings of two well-known jihadists, Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, were also surveyed to obtain an understanding of the jihadi Salafist perspective. In James Gelvin’s article “Al-Qaeda and Anarchism: A Historian’s Reply to Terrorology,” bin Laden’s discussion of the Rightly Guided Caliphate is recounted. He stresses the unity that existed during the Rightly Guided Caliphate period and boasted that modern Muslims are becoming reunified—an occurrence that proves that the reestablishment of a new Rightly Guided Caliphate will happen soon.⁴⁶ Al-Zawahiri’s lecture to the people of Tunisia in “Zawahiri Urges Tunisians Seek Shariah-Based Governance” is surveyed as well. In it, he explains his views on the importance of adopting Sharia and the deviance of separating Islam from governance—and recounted that the Rightly Guided Caliphs themselves were willing to wage jihad protect the assimilation of Islam and government.⁴⁷

This collective survey of contemporary Salafist sources finds several major trends. First, the authors explained that the first generation of Muslims were infallible as a group, but acknowledged the imperfection of the individuals who comprised it. Second, the unity of the umma during this period was described as exceptionally strong, even after deviant factions began to undermine it during Uthman’s tenure. Third, the

⁴⁵ Safar al-Hawali, “When the Ummah Deviated from the Actions of the Heart,” trans. Tarek Mehanna, July 17, 2008, <http://iskandrani.wordpress.com/2008/07/17/when-the-ummah-deviated-from-the-actions-of-the-heart/>.

⁴⁶ James Gelvin, “Al-Qaeda and Anarchism: A Historian’s Reply to Terrorology,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20, no. 4 (2008), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09546550802257291>, 573–75.

⁴⁷ Ayman al-Zawahiri, “Zawahiri Urges Tunisians Seek Shariah-Based Governance,” June 10, 2012, <http://triceratops.brynmawr.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/10066/8965/ZAW20120610.pdf?sequence=4>, 1–4.

authors did not blame Ali for either his conflict with Mu’awiyah or the later formalization of the Shi’a sect, which contemporary Salafists consider deviant. These trends are described in detail later in this study.

D. METHODS AND SOURCES

This study employs a combination of analytic approaches to answer the primary research question, including the historical, historiographical, and comparative study methods. The historical study method is used to ascertain the reality of the Rightly Guided Caliphate. As mentioned earlier, this involves an examination of its four caliphs, the subjects the caliphate was comprised of, the challenges it was faced with, the ways in which it dealt with those challenges and exercised power, and how it changed from one ruler to the next. Special emphasis is placed on the circumstances surrounding the reign of the fourth caliph, Ali ibn Abi Talib, due to its role in forming the longstanding Sunni-Shi’a rift. Through historical study, the composition, function, and evolution of the caliphate are explained.

Historiographical study is then used to examine the contemporary Salafist narrative regarding the tumultuous Rightly Guided Caliphate period. This includes the movement’s account of the leaders within the caliphate, denial or acknowledgment of the misdeeds of the companions, and overall perception of the unity of the umma during this period. These details provide a greater understanding of contemporary Salafists’ views of the Rightly Guided Caliphate.

The final analytic approach this study uses is comparative study. The traditional historical account of the Rightly Guided Caliphate is compared to the historiographical interpretation of the contemporary Salafist narrative of the period. By examining the context of and comparing the two accounts, the answer to the most important aspect of this research—why the seemingly tumultuous Rightly Guided Caliphate period forms much of the historical basis for contemporary Salafists’ ideal re-grounding of the Islamic faith—is answered.

E. THESIS OVERVIEW

This master’s thesis is organized along a five-chapter construct. Following this introductory chapter, the second chapter analyzes the traditional historical account of the Rightly Guided Caliphate. It examines several major aspects of each caliph’s reign, including the subjects the caliphate was comprised of, the challenges it was faced with, the ways in which it dealt with those challenges and exercised power, and how it changed from one ruler to the next.

The third chapter examines the contemporary Salafist movement and its narrative of the Rightly Guided Caliphate. It begins by providing an overview of the movement’s roots, doctrine, and composition for context. Then, it discusses the narrative’s account of the beliefs and actions of the early Muslim leaders, denial or acknowledgment of misdeeds, perception of the unity of the umma during this formative period, and perspective on the Sunni-Shi’ā rift.

The fourth chapter compares the traditional historical account with the contemporary Salafist narrative of the Rightly Guided Caliphate and offers an explanation for why contemporary Salafists hold the period in such high regard despite its tumultuous nature. The thesis then concludes with a fifth chapter, which summarizes this study’s findings and offers policy recommendations.

The major finding of this study is that the contemporary Salafist movement holds the Rightly Guided Caliphate in such high regard, despite the paradoxical turmoil and violence associated with it, because they consider it to be the summit of both spiritual purity and temporal power in Islamic history. Contemporary Salafists, like their modern Salafist predecessors, long for a resurgence of Muslim power in the world, but do not want to sacrifice religious purity to obtain it. The Rightly Guided Caliphate epitomizes this notion because its earliest generation was the most pure, in terms of the practice of Islam, of any Muslim generation, and its seemingly miraculous expansion signified enormous temporal power—relative to its competitors, who have since overtaken them—that is easily romanticized. The narrative omits much of the violence that occurred during the Rightly Guided Caliphate period to protect an idealized remembrance of the

state's power, not its religious unity, and the problems that were acknowledged are done so in a manner that reinforces the importance of key aspects of contemporary Salafist doctrine, including the detrimental effects that can result from ignoring the Prophet's example.

II. THE REALITY OF THE RIGHTLY GUIDED CALIPHATE

A. OVERVIEW

Throughout the course of his life, the Prophet Mohammad accomplished many extraordinary feats. He consolidated all of Arabia into a new order—one that transcended deep-seated, longstanding tribal loyalties—and organized it into a functional state with a common religion. The binding power of the tribe was not replaced, but instead was subsumed by an institution with a supernatural purpose: the *umma*, or body of believers. Grounded in the tenets of Islam (which Mohammad emphasized was not a new religion but rather the restoration of the principles of the prophets of old), the community he forged strove for peace through social justice and cooperation. Therefore, the death of the Prophet in 632 became a watershed event in human history. With the passing of “one of the most remarkable lives in the history of the world,”⁴⁸ the fledgling Islamic state, and the religious principles it embodied, stood at a crossroads.⁴⁹

Although the sudden absence of the Prophet’s powerful leadership could have resulted in the demise of the fragile state and its new interpretation of an ancient religion, rather than falling apart, the state was strengthened and expanded during the tenure of Mohammad’s first four successors. Each of these rulers had been companions of the Prophet, and they would later become known as the *Rightly Guided Caliphs*. These men were Abu Bakr, who reigned from 632 to 634; Umar ibn al-Kattab, reigning from 634 to 644; Uthman ibn Affan, reigning from 644 to 656; and Ali ibn Abi Talib, whose reign lasted from 656 to 661. During the course of these four rulers’ successive regimes, the caliphate not only strengthened its power within the Arabian Peninsula, but underwent an enormous expansion as well, challenging the declining Byzantine and Sassanid Empires and extending its reach from Arabia into Egypt, the Caucasus, and modern-day Afghanistan. Despite this seemingly miraculous success, the period was also marked by significant religious and political turmoil, highlighted by the assassination of three of the

⁴⁸ Robert Goldston, *The Sword of the Prophet: A History of the Arab World from the Time of Mohammed to the Present Day* (New York: Dial Press, 1979), 45.

⁴⁹ Shaban, *Islamic History*, 14–15.

four ruling caliphs, intense fighting amongst the Prophet’s companions, and the origination of the sectarian divide between Sunni and Shi’a.⁵⁰

The purpose of this chapter is to present a dispassionate account of the reality of the Rightly Guided Caliphate so that it may be used as a baseline against which the contemporary Salafist narrative can be compared. The account that will be presented is informed by authoritative historical works, including the arguments posed by prominent early Islamic historians M.A. Shaban, Hugh Kennedy, J.J. Saunders, and Patricia Crone. This chapter will examine each of the four Rightly Guided Caliph’s reigns individually to explain the subjects who comprised the state, the challenges the state faced, the means with which the state dealt with those challenges, and how the state changed from one ruler to the next. The results of these findings will validate or repudiate this study’s first major hypothesis: that the tremendous turmoil existent during the Rightly Guided Caliphate period was a function of the political challenges each caliph faced, and the nature of these challenges drove the caliphs to respond in ways that do not appear to be consistent with the actions and teachings of the Prophet.

B. THE SUCCESSOR: ABU BAKR

1. Composition of the State

Though Mohammad did not name a successor before his death in 632, Abu Bakr was quickly selected by the Prophet’s companions to lead the young state. The choice of Abu Bakr was prudent; he had been one of the Prophet’s closest friends, his father-in-law, and had faced significant personal danger as one of the earliest converts to the Islamic faith. Though neither a prophet nor a soldier, Abu Bakr was well-known and well-respected among his peers. His selection as ruler would prove to be extremely advantageous, because his decisive—yet humble—leadership was well suited for the inimitable composition and character of the Muslim state he was entrusted with. Two factors, in particular, made the state so unique: its ability to forge a bond between the political *and* religious spheres, making it both a state and a community of believers; and

⁵⁰ Esposito, *Islam*, 40.

its ability to not only contain the restiveness of the tribes who belonged to it, but to leverage their fighting spirit into the fuel for the enormous expansion that continued long after Abu Bakr's reign was concluded.

The first aspect of the early Islamic state Abu Bakr inherited that made it so unique was its simultaneous political *and* religious nature. Mohammad united a vast number of tribes, each with a long history of fierce independence and predisposition to conflict, into a single state that ascribed to the tenets of Islam. The umma comprised both a state and a community of believers, and in the words of Patricia Crone, its members were both “believers and citizens . . . ruled by the Prophet, [and] thereafter by his successors.”⁵¹ This condition did not change during Abu Bakr's reign, despite the series of challenges that threatened it. The unique political and religious nature of the early umma stood in stark contrast to the example of their early Christian contemporaries. The Christian experience was one of separate, sometimes competing affiliations to their polity and religion. The Roman Empire, ruled by Caesar, represented the former while the church, led by its clerics, represented the latter. Much like the way the early Christian experience laid the foundation for a longstanding tradition of separation of church and state, the early umma's combined political and religious nature provides modern Islamists with the historical example they wish to emulate.⁵²

The second important characteristic of Abu Bakr's early Islamic state was the factional, independent, and restive nature of the tribes who comprised it. Tribal factionalism and independence had long been a trait of Arab culture, and the Prophet's death provided an opportunity for these two tendencies to reemerge in a way that almost destroyed the fragile state.⁵³ While many tribes along the periphery of the state decided to revoke their allegiance, the fact that Mohammad's loyal followers in Medina (the *ansar*) nearly chose the same course speaks volumes about the strength of tribal factionalism and the Arabs' fierce independence.⁵⁴ Restiveness was demonstrated by

⁵¹ Crone, *God's Rule*, 13.

⁵² Ibid., 13–16.

⁵³ Esposito, *Islam*, 41.

⁵⁴ Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests*, 54–55.

those who rebelled against the state during Abu Bakr's reign as well as those who chose to remain loyal to it, through the willingness of both sides to engage in armed conflict to pursue their goals.⁵⁵

2. Challenges Faced By the State

Had it not been for the strong leadership of Abu Bakr, the death of the Prophet in 632 could have easily hastened the collapse of the fledgling Islamic state. As mentioned earlier, two separate—yet closely related—existential crises emerged to challenge the Islamic state and its umma: one of *succession*, and another of *secession*. In many ways, the failure of the Prophet to name a successor helped fan the flames of the secession issue. Both crises were confronted head on, and in the short two year reign of Abu Bakr, his decisive actions and shrewd governance not only enabled the fledgling Muslim polity to weather those crises, but paved the way for a tradition of expansion that would persist long after his own death in 643.

While both of these major challenges emerged quickly in the days following the death of the Prophet, the crisis of succession was the most immediate issue that needed to be dealt with. Mohammad's failure to name a successor before his death created a major problem for his companions; if the young Islamic state was to survive, it would need a leader; many factions within the umma had already begun to consider their own specific needs, indicating that a fracturing of the state a distinct possibility. Although the Prophet's death came relatively quickly, his health had been failing for several months, and yet he still made no pronouncement about whom (if anyone) would succeed him.⁵⁶ Unfortunately, since Mohammad had neither a male heir nor a specified deputy, no clear candidate stood out. Shaban stated that the Prophet most likely intended to defer the issue of succession to his companions as a result of these circumstances and “his deep understanding of his times.”⁵⁷ Further associated with the problem of naming a successor was the question of what this new leader's role would be. Since Mohammad

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Shaban, *Islamic History*, 16.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

had made it clear to his followers that he was the *seal of the Prophets*, the role that any potential successor would play—within both the political and religious spheres—was open to a great amount of interpretation.⁵⁸

The second major crisis that challenged the fledgling Islamic state shortly after the Prophet’s death was the issue of secession. Factions from both the core and the periphery of the state began to reevaluate their positions and willingness to remain within it. Inside the very heart of the state, though they never considered abandoning Islam as a religion, the ansar of Medina began to reconsider their willingness to share power with Mohammad’s Quraysh tribe. Many members of the Quraysh were quickly gaining influence within the state, despite their recent history of persecuting the earliest Muslims and warring with the Medinans before their conversion to Islam.⁵⁹ From the periphery of the state, the allegiance of those tribes was even more problematic. Though warfare was certainly an important and effective method of state expansion and preservation for the Prophet, Kennedy argued that Mohammad’s reputation and masterful use of diplomacy were the largest factors in the peripheral tribes’ (such as those in Yemen and Oman) willingness to accept Islam and join with the new state.⁶⁰ For many of those tribes, their sense of pride and fierce independent spirit were bruised by this subservience to Mohammad and the core of the state.⁶¹ Therefore, when Mohammad died, many of them seceded on the grounds that their allegiance had been given to Mohammad, the man, not to the state itself.⁶² With the Prophet’s vast influence gone, swift and decisive action was necessary to hold the state together.

3. The Exercise of Power

The first series of problems associated with succession were settled in dramatic fashion. With the dissolution of the fragile state almost imminent, Mohammad’s companion (and future caliph) Umar ibn al-Kattab acted shrewdly to deal with the

⁵⁸ Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests*, 54–55.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 48, 55.

⁶¹ Saunders, *History of Medieval Islam*, 40–41.

⁶² Ibid.

problem of choosing a successor. Through a move that Kennedy termed a “coup d’État,” Umar swore his allegiance to Abu Bakr in the presence of Quraysh and ansar leaders, engendering a sense of obligation within both sides and prompting each to follow suit.⁶³ This clever political move brought resolution to several immediate questions associated with the selection of a successor. First and foremost, it ensured that there would indeed be a successor to Mohammad, Abu Bakr, and that he would exercise both political and religious power. Second, it settled one of the most pressing factional disputes by establishing that the new leader, a Qurayshite himself, would rule both Quraysh and ansar. Third, it ensured that the leadership of the state would remain in the hands of the Prophet’s companions. Fourth, it delineated that while Mecca would remain the religious center of the state, political power would continue to be based in Medina.⁶⁴ With the leadership of the young state securely in Abu Bakr’s hands, the question of role definition could be addressed.

While Abu Bakr was thrust into a position of political and religious responsibility, the nature of his selection and his non-prophet status severely limited his authority at a time when the existence of the state was still challenged by secession. Initially, Abu Bakr exercised his minimal power in a very humble and subdued manner.⁶⁵ Out of deference to the Prophet and unwillingness to tie his post to a specific set of responsibilities, he assumed the title *Kalifat rasul-Allah*, or *successor to the Prophet of Allah*—a title later shortened to *caliph*.⁶⁶ This title possessed a measure of ambiguity that would give Abu Bakr time to determine his responsibilities and define his position.⁶⁷ Additionally, his service as caliph was only a part-time endeavor at first; he continued to support his family through merchant work and milking sheep until the umma decided that a full-time caliph was necessary.⁶⁸ To preserve the Qur'an and Sunna, Abu Bakr appointed Zaid ibn Thabit, a renowned scholar, to begin the task of collecting the

⁶³ Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests*, 54.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 54–56.

⁶⁵ Shaban, *Islamic History*, 18–19.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 19.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

Prophet's teachings.⁶⁹ Over time, Abu Bakr's humility, careful adherence to the guidance of the Qur'an and Sunna, and success in dealing with the secession problem granted him the legitimacy necessary to assume modest political and religious power.⁷⁰

The Islamic state's second major crisis, the secession of many of its peripheral tribes, was confronted in a decisive manner. Abu Bakr and the other leaders of the state quickly decided that they would not permit secession; they resolved that anyone who pledged allegiance to the Prophet must transfer it to the caliphate's new leadership and continue to render tribute payments or else they would lose their status as Muslims.⁷¹ To preserve both the state and the future of Islam, Abu Bakr directed his new general, Khalid ibn al-Walid, to execute a series of decisive military actions to subdue disloyal tribes and force them back into the state.⁷² These *Wars of Apostasy* were concluded within a year, resolving the secession crisis. The rapid mobilization of a zealous army of believers also formed the foundation for future campaigns: recognizing the value in harnessing the restive nature and warlike spirit of the loyal Bedouin tribes for the benefit of the state, Abu Bakr turned his attention, and Khalid's forces, towards Byzantine Syria.⁷³ Khalid was tasked with conducting a series of raids and probing actions outside of Arabia that eventually culminated in the sound defeat of a Byzantine army near Damascus shortly before Abu Bakr's death in 634.⁷⁴

4. Evolution of the State under Abu Bakr

Though it only lasted two years, Abu Bakr's reign proved to be a tremendous boon for both his state and the religion of Islam. At the beginning of his tenure, the very existence of both was threatened. The crisis of succession, which was brought about by Mohammad's failure to appoint a successor and the absence of a clear candidate, left the

⁶⁹ Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Sharia Law: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2008), 58; Bertold Spuler, *The Muslim World, Part I: The Age of the Caliphs*, trans. F. R. C. Bagley (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1960), 31.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 19, 24; Crone, *God's Rule*, 18.

⁷¹ Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests*, 55–56.

⁷² Ibid., 56.

⁷³ Shaban, *Islamic History*, 23, 25.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 26.

political and religious leadership of the umma in question. The selection of Abu Bakr, and his subsequent commitment to following the guidance of the Qur'an and Sunna, provided the basis for continued political and religious leadership under one ruler that became the hallmark of the Rightly Guided Caliphate. Similarly, Abu Bakr's resolve in bringing the apostate tribes—and their tribute payments—back to the state ensured the preservation of both the state and its religion. As the state's government, religion, sources of funding, and social order were restored and strengthened, Abu Bakr masterfully turned this momentum outward, directing his military to conduct campaigns beyond Arabia and into Iraq and Syria. These military actions led to additional sources of revenue, promulgated the spread of Islam, and sent a message to the Byzantines and Sassanids that a rival power was on the rise. At the time of his death in 634, a united, Islamic Arabia was ready to challenge the world.⁷⁵

C. UMAR AND THE BIRTH OF AN EMPIRE

1. Composition the State

Fortunately for the Islamic state, there was no succession crisis after Abu Bakr's death. The first caliph broke with the precedence set by Mohammad and recommended to the other companions that Umar ibn al-Kattab should replace him after his death.⁷⁶ Umar, the man whose support of Abu Bakr during that earlier crisis of succession had essentially preserved the caliphate, took the reins without controversy or dispute in 634.⁷⁷ Before his selection as the new caliph, Umar had risen to prominence within the state without the benefit of belonging to an elite family or holding a reputation for military prowess.⁷⁸ Instead, the success of his career up to that point was owed more to his political shrewdness, excellent judgment of character, loyalty, and ability to provide sound counsel to his seniors.⁷⁹ The caliphate he inherited was newly reunified, protected by a zealous military, and poised for expansion. Incorporated within its borders was the

⁷⁵ Ibid., 25–27.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 28.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Saunders, *History of Medieval Islam*, 45.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

entirety of the Arabian Peninsula, and to its north and east were the exposed flanks of the Byzantine and Sassanid Empires.⁸⁰ As it did for Abu Bakr, one distinct feature of Arabian society of the time would prove extremely important during Umar's tenure: the factional and restive nature of its tribes. This was particularly so for the recently reconquered apostate tribes. Although Abu Bakr had brought the apostates back into the state, he retained his suspicions and barred them from full participation in the activities of the umma—including military service.⁸¹ This resulted in a significant amount of “frustrated energies”⁸² that could have created serious problems for Umar.

2. Challenges Faced By the State

In comparison to the existential crises Abu Bakr was forced to deal with, the problems that Umar was confronted with could be described as *good* problems, since the latter mostly resulted from success. This does not mean, however, that Umar's problems were less complex. For Umar, these challenges came in two waves: the first set included those he inherited upon ascending to the position of caliph, and the second set developed as a result of the rapid expansion of the Islamic state.

At the beginning of Umar's tenure, two major problems existed. The first of these was associated with the “frustrated energies”⁸³ of the former apostate tribes that was mentioned above. Although the caliphate was firmly united, the rebellious tribes whose reentry had to be forced were not forgiven quickly. Abu Bakr's policy restricted those apostates from participating in the caliphal military campaigns against the Byzantines and Sassanids that accelerated as the Wars of Apostasy wound down. For those former rebels, the resultant loss of opportunity, affront to their honor, and unequal treatment could have fermented and eventually led to more rebellion. Umar's second immediate problem was the growth of tensions between the caliphate and its Byzantine and Sassanid neighbors. As a result of their clashes with the increasingly powerful Islamic armies,

⁸⁰ Ibid., 45–46.

⁸¹ Shaban, *Islamic History*, 28.

⁸² Ibid., 29.

⁸³ Ibid.

both empires quickly mobilized additional forces to counter the rise of the caliphate.⁸⁴ Escalation of conflict was all but inevitable.⁸⁵

As the caliphate went on to achieve a stream of victories against its imperial neighbors, the Islamic state's enormous success created a new series of problems for Umar to contend with. As vast territory from Syria, Iraq, Egypt, and Persia was incorporated into the growing caliphate, the monumental problem of governing these new subjects emerged.⁸⁶ The ends and means associated with the treatment, protection, taxation, organization, and administration of these conquered territories had to be selected and established in a way that benefited the Islamic state.⁸⁷ Complicating these policy challenges was another issue, one that pertained to the post of the caliph itself. Throughout the course of the young state's rapid expansion, Umar recognized that the limited powers entrusted to his post ill-equipped the caliph to govern his budding empire.⁸⁸ The successful military campaigns that expanded the boundaries of Islam were only partially directed by the caliph himself, and only through force of will, savvy political maneuvering, and physical presence at certain decisive points was Umar able to establish a sufficient measure of control over the processes for incorporating the newly conquered territories into the state.⁸⁹ The ways in which Umar confronted these problems would have repercussions for the future of the caliphate.

3. The Exercise of Power

Though the actual powers of his post were significantly limited, Umar made the most of them by acting decisively in the instances he could. Faced with the immediate problems of growing internal tension from the newly reconquered apostate tribes and the external Byzantine and Sassanid threats, Umar's first act as caliph was a brilliant move: he vigorously overturned his predecessor's policy of excluding the former apostate tribes

⁸⁴ Ibid., 29–30.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Saunders, *History of Medieval Islam*, 45, 47–48.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Shaban, *Islamic History*, 56.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 56–57.

from military campaigning by encouraging their active participation.⁹⁰ This decision simultaneously achieved the total reunification of umma, refocused the restive energies of the Bedouin tribes in a way that would benefit—rather than harm—the state, and generated the additional combat power necessary to counter the Byzantine and Sassanid mobilizations.⁹¹ These new warriors were quickly integrated into the powerful Islamic military.

Over the course of Umar's reign, the newly strengthened Muslim army pressed its neighbors on three fronts: the north, west, and east. The northern campaign succeeded in taking Damascus by 636, Jerusalem by 638, and the entirety of Byzantine Syria by 639. To the west, Muslim forces met little resistance as they descended upon Byzantine Egypt with 3,000 cavalry in 639; by 640, all of Egypt was easily under Muslim control. To the east, Muslim forces systematically conquered a disintegrating Sassanid Empire. In 637, Qadisiyah was taken in a battle that saw the destruction of the bulk of Persian forces. This victory was followed by the capture of Ctesiphon on the Tigris River, then all of Iraq, and by 651, Persia was fully incorporated when the last Sassanid king, Yazdajird, was killed—as a fugitive.⁹²

To effectively govern these newly conquered territories, Umar implemented several important policies. First, with a profound appreciation for how important the loyalty of these new subjects to the caliphate would be, Umar ordered the favorable treatment of the Syrians, Egyptians, and Iraqis. The abuses those provinces suffered at the hands of their former Byzantine and Sassanid masters not only made them easier to conquer, but much easier to govern as well—and Umar exploited that condition.⁹³ In exchange for their payment of tribute, Christians and Jews retained their religious freedoms, and local governments were retained and incorporated within the caliphate.⁹⁴ The Islamic forces that conquered those territories were forbidden from seizing land and

⁹⁰ Ibid., 28–29.

⁹¹ Ibid., 28–30.

⁹² Arthur Goldschmidt Jr., *A Concise History of the Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2002), 53–55; Goldston, *Sword of the Prophet*, 52–58.

⁹³ Saunders, *History of Medieval Islam*, 46–47, 51–53.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 46, 51–53.

were mostly confined to outposts that kept them away from the local populace; this ensured minimal interruption of the lives and business of the new territory—as well as the flow of taxes to Medina.⁹⁵ Instead of allowing the conquering soldiers to collect booty, they were given stipends from the caliphal treasury.⁹⁶ Umar’s second major policy, which pertained to the treatment of Persia, was much different. Since Umar viewed the Sassanids as a profound threat to the security of the caliphate, he made the fateful decision to “annihilate, rather than defeat” them.⁹⁷ Although the Persians adopted Islam, they were far less willing to integrate into the caliphate politically and defiantly retained their language and culture.⁹⁸ The Persians’ harsh treatment at the hands of their Arab conquerors enraged them. This harsh treatment set the conditions for an act of vengeance; among the thousands of Persians that were enslaved and humiliated, one of them succeeded in assassinating Umar as he led a worship service in Medina in 644.⁹⁹

The last major challenge that Umar confronted was the limitations of his own power as caliph. The best evidence of Umar’s acceptance of this condition can be found in his decision to adopt the title of *amir al-mu’minin*. Although historians have interpreted the title’s meaning many different ways, Shaban makes a compelling argument that the selection of the word *amir* was meant in the context of “counselor,” and *mu’minin* in the context of “*the inner circle of the Islamic community*.¹⁰⁰ This interpretation indicates that Umar accepted two things about his role: that it was more political than religious in nature, and that his exercise of political authority was characterized more by advising and guiding than by forcing and directing.¹⁰¹ To overcome these limitations and ensure that effective policy was adopted during the course

⁹⁵ Ibid., 47–48.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 56.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 57.

¹⁰⁰ Shaban, *Islamic History*, 57. Italics added for emphasis.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 56–57, 60.

and aftermath of the caliphal military campaigns, Umar made use of his political skill and forceful personality, as well as physically visited locations where a decision needed to be made or reinforced.¹⁰²

4. Evolution of the State under Umar

During Umar's reign, the caliphate experienced several significant changes that were either caused or effected by its tremendous success. At the beginning of his tenure, though the Islamic state encompassed the entire Arabian Peninsula, a large portion of its tribes had been forcibly reintegrated into the caliphate and subsequently denied the ability to participate in the lucrative military campaigns that were gaining steam against the Byzantines and Sassanids. This stoked underlying tensions that could have erupted into significant problems for the caliphate. From a governance standpoint, the scope of the challenges in administering the caliphate was relatively small. Externally, the caliphate's military successes against its two powerful neighbors led to increased tensions that could have resulted in the eventual defeat of the Islamic state. By the end of his reign, Umar's masterful performance affected numerous changes. He regained the loyalty of the former apostate tribes; transformed his state into an empire by conquering Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Persia; established processes for administering, taxing, and protecting its newly incorporated provinces; and recast the post of caliph into one with a more secular character. While Umar's extraordinary vision and leadership enabled the remarkable expansion and reorganization of the caliphate that occurred during his tenure, his successor would not enjoy the same measure of success.¹⁰³

D. BOILING TENSIONS AND THE TUMULTUOUS REIGN OF UTHMAN

1. Composition of the State

Umar's shocking assassination in 644 marked the turning of an era for the Rightly Guided Caliphate. Under his tenure, the caliphate had enjoyed a period of unity, prosperity, and expansion, but conditions were emerging that would evolve into problems

¹⁰² Ibid., 56; Saunders, *History of Medieval Islam*, 47–48.

¹⁰³ Goldschmidt Jr., *Concise History*, 53–55.

his successor would be ill-equipped to deal with. Like the Prophet before him, Umar decided against recommending a successor. Before succumbing to his fatal wounds, he designated a six-member council from the most prominent companions of Mohammad to select the next caliph. The most feasible candidates were Ali ibn Abi Talib, Mohammad's cousin and son-in-law, and Uthman ibn Affan, who hailed from the affluent Umayyad family and was himself married to two of the Prophet's daughters. As one of the earliest converts to Islam and the first to come from a wealthy family, Uthman was well-loved by the Prophet. He was known to be extremely pious, generous, and fiercely devoted to Islam. He was also closely aligned with the Meccan elites who formed a significant portion of the state's power base. Ali was reportedly offered the post first, so long as he agreed to govern with subdued power like his predecessors had done. Ali's refusal to take the reins without increased political and religious authority prompted the council to nominate Uthman, who accepted both the post and the council's conditions. Thus began the 12 year reign of the embattled third caliph.¹⁰⁴

In a major sense, the passing of Umar can be seen as a point of momentum change. Prior to his death in 644, expansion occurred at a rapid pace; afterwards, though the caliphate did go on to enjoy a number of military triumphs, its territorial growth would slow significantly.¹⁰⁵ By the time Uthman assumed the mantle of leadership for the burgeoning caliphate, the Muslim empire spanned from Egypt, to Syria, to the Arabian Peninsula; had defeated the Sassanid Empire; and was on the march across Persia. The third caliph inherited a vast empire and exceptionally capable military. Unfortunately, he also inherited two major conditions that challenged his rule and eventually contributed to his own brutal assassination: growing tensions between the core and periphery of the Islamic empire, and lack of support for the expansion of caliphal authority to meet those and other emerging problems.¹⁰⁶ These conditions and their resultant challenges will be discussed in detail below.

¹⁰⁴ Shaban, *Islamic History*, 61–63; Saunders, *History of Medieval Islam*, 59–62.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 60–61.

¹⁰⁶ Shaban, *Islamic History*, 60, 62; Saunders, *History of Medieval Islam*, 61.

2. Challenges Faced By the State

The first major condition that underpinned many of the problems Uthman faced during his tenure was the divergence of political and economic interests between the core and periphery of the state. The astounding pace of expansion that the caliphate experienced resulted in three noteworthy effects: it generated a tremendous amount of wealth; spurred the migration of Arabs from the interior of the empire to the new provinces forming in Syria, Egypt, Iraq, and Persia; and invited retribution from the Byzantine Empire.¹⁰⁷ For Meccans and Medinans, who had been the earliest members and who represented the traditional power base of the caliphate, the political and economic empowerment of the empire's burgeoning periphery was viewed as a threat to their interests.¹⁰⁸ Within the periphery, those who had sacrificed to expand the caliphate's borders and who stood ready to defend them against Byzantine aggression developed a strong sense of independence and began to take enormous pride in the regions within which they now lived.¹⁰⁹ These tribesmen began to demand their share of the spoils of war and looked at the core's efforts to retain control of the provinces, and their resources, with suspicion.¹¹⁰

Two of the most prominent challenges Uthman was faced with that resulted from these tensions took place in the Kufa Province of Iraq and Egypt. The Kufa case began as a conflict over land rights. Instead of dividing up the most lucrative Sassanid properties captured in the province, special Kufan administrators (known as the *qurra*) took the liberty to retain them and distribute the profits among the warriors who had helped liberate them.¹¹¹ Uthman's attempt to establish caliphal administrative control over the *qurra*'s system angered them and triggered a series of events that led to the Kufans' defiant expulsion of the caliph's appointed governor, Said ibn al-As, and

¹⁰⁷ Shaban, *Islamic History*, 60, 63; Saunders, *History of Medieval Islam*, 60–61.

¹⁰⁸ Shaban, *Islamic History*, 60.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 61.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 67.

replacement with their own candidate, Abu Musa al-Ashari.¹¹² Within Egypt, it was the conflict over the distribution of war spoils that challenged the caliph. To encourage greater participation in his campaigns across North Africa and more effectively defend against the Byzantine threat, Uthman's governor of Egypt, Abdullah ibn Saad ibn Abi Sarh, offered a larger share of war spoils to those willing to render military support.¹¹³ Since this act would inevitably decrease their share of the profits, elites within the caliphate's core became upset over this.¹¹⁴

As if the challenges that arose from the conflict between the caliphal core and periphery weren't injurious enough, they were further complicated by Uthman's inability to exercise the authority necessary to deal with them. As previously noted, Uthman's selection to the post of caliph was contingent upon his willingness to follow the policies of his two predecessors. For Abu Bakr and Umar, the limited religious and political authorities they possessed were sufficient to deal with the problems of their time, though Umar apparently recognized that the tipping point was coming. During Uthman's tenure, the mounting problems of taxing, administering, and defending a large and diverse empire eventually surpassed the scope of the limited caliphal authorities he inherited.¹¹⁵ Elites within the state wanted the caliph's powers to remain limited because they wanted to ensure their influence and interests were protected, but the challenges of governance and spirit of independence that grew within the provinces required greater central authority. Uthman was caught between these two opposing forces, and his attempts to exert greater authority eventually contributed to his downfall.¹¹⁶

3. The Exercise of Power

Although the motives behind many of Uthman's decisions are widely interpreted today the complexity of the problems he faced required a greater level of authority to

¹¹² Ibid., 67–68.

¹¹³ Ibid., 68.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 68–69.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 70; Saunders, *History of Medieval Islam*, 62.

¹¹⁶ Crone, *God's Rule*, 20; Saunders, *History of Medieval Islam*, 62.

properly deal with than what he inherited from Umar.¹¹⁷ Uthman was forced to balance the conflicting interests of both the core and periphery with the practical necessity of effectively administering the caliphate and defending it from rival powers. An examination of his policies suggests that his actions were largely focused on those two problems. To maintain the precarious balance between the wishes of the core's elites and the budding independence of the provinces, Uthman intervened in questions of resource distribution and directed the launch of a new series of military campaigns to open new sources of revenue.¹¹⁸ To effectively administer and defend the caliphate, Uthman appointed loyal—but capable—family members to important posts, used state funds to garner support for his policies and strengthen his political position as caliph, and sought to prevent possible religious disputes by standardizing the Qur'an into a single version.¹¹⁹

Achieving a balance between the desires of the growing periphery and the traditional power base of the caliphate was a nearly impossible task, because neither side seemed willing to place their own interests below the good of the state. Uthman did indeed try to balance those interests, as evidenced by several instances of intervention in disputes over resource distribution. In the Kufan land administration case mentioned earlier, Uthman attempted to assert control over the system to prevent the financial gains from remaining solely in the hands of the *qurra*.¹²⁰ When complaints over the Egyptian governor's strict taxation policies were registered, Uthman sent an envoy to look into the matter.¹²¹ The caliph also took measures to ensure that the large number of immigrants moving from the center of the state into the provinces received payments from the treasury to supplement their share of the war spoils.¹²² Another major policy Uthman enacted to further the interests of both the core and periphery was the opening of a new

¹¹⁷ Shaban, *Islamic History*, 63, 70; Saunders, *History of Medieval Islam*, 61–63; Crone, *God's Rule*, 19.

¹¹⁸ Shaban, *Islamic History*, 66–68.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 66; Saunders, *History of Medieval Islam*, 61–62.

¹²⁰ Shaban, *Islamic History*, 67.

¹²¹ Ibid., 69.

¹²² Ibid., 66–67.

series of military campaigns to bring in additional sources of revenue.¹²³ These campaigns were directed farther westward into North Africa, northward into the Caspian region, and eastward beyond Persia.¹²⁴

In an effort to enhance the effectiveness of governance and security of the caliphate, Uthman enacted several other policies. First, in a move criticized as nepotistic, he appointed a number of family members to important posts, especially within the provinces. The budding independent nature of the periphery and their squabbles with the core over resource distribution prompted Uthman to exert greater control over the provinces, and he did so by placing the governorships of Kufa, Basra, and Egypt in the hands of loyal family members.¹²⁵ (Uthman's cousin, Mu'awiya, was already the governor of Syria at the beginning of the third caliph's term).¹²⁶ Second, in what Shaban viewed as a move to solidify support for Uthman's policies back home, the caliph took greater liberties with the core's share of war spoils than his predecessors had done and apparently created a system of patronage to reward those who rendered political support.¹²⁷ The third major decision Uthman made was to allow the standardization of the Qur'an into one single version. Before this decision, several variants were used, and the action was meant to forestall any future problems with interpretation.¹²⁸

Unfortunately for Uthman and the validity of his post, his policies were not well received. His efforts to balance the conflicting interests of the rapidly expanding umma and impose a greater degree of authority over the caliphate caused him to lose a great deal of support. Whether his increased involvement in resource distribution, appointment of family members to important posts, development of a patronage system, and standardization of the Qur'an were driven by nepotism and corruption or were simply measures he deemed necessary to govern effectively, they were wholly unpopular. Thus,

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 66.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 69–70.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 70; Saunders, *History of Medieval Islam*, 61.

when rebellious factions from Egypt and Iraq encircled his home for almost 50 days to force his resignation in 656, Uthman's closest supporters—including many of the Prophet's surviving companions, abandoned him. Eventually, some members of the angry mob broke into Uthman's home and murdered him while his open Qur'an rested on his lap.¹²⁹

4. Evolution of the State under Uthman

The caliphate underwent tremendous changes during Uthman's tenure. From a territorial standpoint, growth did occur—though it was far less rapid and far more costly than the previous expansion seen during earlier caliphs' reigns.¹³⁰ Under Uthman's leadership, a navy was constructed, enabling the caliphate to invade Cyprus in 649, raid Rhodes and Kos in 654, and challenge Byzantine naval dominance in the eastern Mediterranean.¹³¹ The caliphate's consolidation of the remnants of the Sassanid Empire was completed in 651, and territory from Armenia was added in 653.¹³² Around that time, these early conquests had reached their limits and the now idle military, with no new lands to conquer and extract spoils from, became restless again. This restiveness along the geographical fringes of the caliphate, coupled with the growing disparity of wealth between the caliphate's interior and exterior and the widespread perception that Uthman's regime was wrought with corruption and nepotism, led to the third caliph's assassination. The assassination marked the beginning of severe tribal fractioning that continued into the reign of the fourth caliph, Ali.¹³³

Politically, Uthman's assassination meant that the post of caliph was broken. The willingness of several disenfranchised factions to conspire against the caliph, who had been one of the Prophet's closest companions, was troublesome. Additionally, the fact that elites within the state, many of whom had also been close to the Prophet, essentially stepped aside and allowed the murder to happen is even more confounding. This series

¹²⁹ Shaban, *Islamic History*, 70; Saunders, *History of Medieval Islam*, 62–63.

¹³⁰ Saunders, *History of Medieval Islam*, 61.

¹³¹ Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests*, 326–27.

¹³² Saunders, *History of Medieval Islam*, 60–61.

¹³³ Goldschmidt Jr., *Concise History*, 57–58; Esposito, *Islam*, 41–42.

of events provides evidence of two major developments that occurred within the umma during the course of Uthman’s reign. First, sub-state interests from aspects of both the periphery and core of the caliphate had grown so profoundly that the well-being of the state and the sanctity of the caliph position were considered secondary by some within the umma.¹³⁴ Second, though most Muslims believed Uthman’s assassination was wrong, a small segment of the umma believed that the caliph’s immoral actions (or “*innovations*”) provided sufficient grounds for his assassination.¹³⁵ The willingness of certain groups to forcibly remove a ruler they considered to be immoral opened the debate over the legality of opposition to unjust Muslim rulers that persists to this day—especially within contemporary Salafist circles, as will be discussed later.¹³⁶

E. ALI’S ASCENSION AND THE ORIGINATION OF THE SUNNI-SHI’A SPLIT

1. Composition of the State

The abhorrent assassination of Uthman left the caliphate in a state of turmoil. Factionalism and self-interest had essentially dissolved the unity of the caliphate and struck a blow to the sanctity of the post of caliph. Egypt, still angry, refused to supply Medina with grain.¹³⁷ While the Umayyad clan—now led by Mu’awiya—fumed over Uthman’s assassination and demanded justice, the companions who had failed to protect the murdered caliph quickly offered the vacant post to Ali.¹³⁸ As the cousin, son-in-law, and earliest male convert of the Prophet, Ali’s stature should have made his right to lead the umma indisputable; however, his unwillingness to endorse Abu Bakr until six months after the latter’s selection to replace Mohammad, reluctance to succeed Umar without significantly expanded caliphal authority, and own failure to defend the besieged Uthman

¹³⁴ Saunders, *History of Medieval Islam*, 62–63; Shaban, *Islamic History*, 70–71.

¹³⁵ Crone, *God’s Rule*, 20. Italics added for emphasis.

¹³⁶ Saunders, *History of Medieval Islam*, 63.

¹³⁷ Shaban, *Islamic History*, 73.

¹³⁸ Saunders, *History of Medieval Islam*, 64.

during his time of crisis generated opposition to Ali's ascension to power.¹³⁹ Despite this opposition, Ali reluctantly assumed the mantle of leadership for the fractioning caliphate, and immediately set about to repair it.¹⁴⁰

2. Challenges Faced By the State

During Ali's five-year reign, he was confronted with numerous challenges that threatened to rip the caliphate apart. Among these many challenges, three of them had the greatest impact on his rule and the future of the state. First, the empire Ali inherited was in turmoil. Although Uthman's murder may have been gratifying for his enemies, the terrible deed, by itself, did nothing to resolve the grievances against him, and the passions of the various parties involved were about to boil over.¹⁴¹ Second, throughout the course of his tenure, Ali was perpetually caught between competing factions that sought to advance their own interests at the expense of their rivals and the welfare of the state.¹⁴² Third, Ali's attempts to exercise power and quell the problems he faced invariably affected one or more of the state's prominent factions, leading to constant resistance to his policies.¹⁴³ Ali was faced with three separate rebellions that threatened his rule and irrevocably fractured the umma.¹⁴⁴ Each of these problems will be addressed separately.

In its simplest form, the most immediate problem Ali was confronted with can be described by one word: passion. As discussed earlier, numerous parties had at least an indirect measure of involvement in Uthman's murder, and emotions ran high among every one of those groups. The Egyptian and Iraqi mobs that had besieged the late caliph's home and demanded his resignation were furious over their perception that the government was rife with corruption and nepotism. For some Egyptians within this mob, the rage was strong enough to elicit an act of murder. Uthman's death, however

¹³⁹ Ibid., 63; Shaban, *Islamic History*, 62.

¹⁴⁰ Saunders, *History of Medieval Islam*, 64.

¹⁴¹ Shaban, *Islamic History*, 74.

¹⁴² Ibid., 72.

¹⁴³ Saunders, *History of Medieval Islam*, 64

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.; Shaban, *Islamic History*, 75–77.

gratifying it may have been for them, did not immediately resolve their grievances.¹⁴⁵ Among many of the elites within the state, passion must have also been a factor in their disloyalty to the caliph and unwillingness to protect him from the deadly mob. Regardless of how the other companions felt about Uthman's policies, their nearness to the caliph and to the Prophet himself could not have been ignored lightly; strong emotion had to have been involved. And for Mu'awiya and the other Umayyads, the murder of their fellow clansman was infuriating and required swift justice.¹⁴⁶

The second problem Ali faced was a problem that was familiar to each of his predecessors: the existence of numerous factions with often-competing interests.¹⁴⁷ The web of factions and interests that Ali would be forced to contend with was extremely intricate. At the macro level, the longstanding conflict between the periphery and core persisted. Egypt and Iraq, especially, remained at odds with the core of the state over their perceived unfair treatment and improper governmental control levied by corrupt and nepotistic officials.¹⁴⁸ Within the core of the state, conflict between various factions also continued, most notably between the Qurayshites—intent on preserving their dominance in the government—and the ansar of Medina.¹⁴⁹ Inter-provincial conflict existed, including a particular case where Syria's refusal to admit immigrants was decried by the other provinces who were forced to absorb all of them.¹⁵⁰ Ali found himself involved in intra-provincial conflicts as well. Kufa was particularly troublesome for the caliph because factionalism within that province led to the fracturing of his coalition of supporters and enabled Ali's eventual demise.¹⁵¹

The third major problem Ali faced was a series of rebellions waged by separate factions opposed to his policies. The first serious threat came from three prominent

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 73.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 74.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 71–75.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 74.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 71.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 72–74.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 76–77.

companions who were eager to preserve Qurayshite control over the state.¹⁵² While traveling in Iraq, Ali's party clashed with a force led by Talha ibn Ubaydullah and Zubayr ibn al-Awwam, two companions of the Prophet whom Ali had allegedly denied political appointments and A'isha bint Abu Bakr, the Prophet's beloved widow.¹⁵³ During the Battle of the Camel (so named because the fighting occurred near the camel A'isha was riding), 10,000 fighters perished, and Ali emerged victorious.¹⁵⁴ Shortly after this triumph, Ali faced a second major insurrection when Mu'awiya, outraged over Ali's failure to vigorously investigate Uthman's murder, confronted him with a sizeable force of Syrian troops.¹⁵⁵ Ali's forces attacked the rebellious army in a series of battles at Siffin in northern Syria in 657.¹⁵⁶ Half-hearted fighting between Mu'awiya's forces and Ali's supporters—many of whom were members of the qurra—was interrupted when Mu'awiya's reserves entered the battle with Qur'ans affixed to their spears as an appeal that the issue should be settled peacefully.¹⁵⁷ Ali agreed to accept arbitration, and when the battle ended with neither side accepting defeat, a sizeable number of Ali's forces abandoned him because they were angry that the caliph had treated with the enemy.¹⁵⁸ These rebels, known as the Kharijites, were eventually defeated by Ali in 658, but the caliph's loss of prestige and the growing stature of Mu'awiya prompted a series of provincial defections to Mu'awiya's faction.¹⁵⁹ Ali's reign came to a bitter end when he was assassinated by a Kharijite in 661, opening the door for Mu'awiya's ascension as caliph and establishment of a new dynasty under the Umayyads.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵² Ibid., 71.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Saunders, *History of Medieval Islam*, 64.

¹⁵⁵ Shaban, *Islamic History*, 74.

¹⁵⁶ Saunders, *History of Medieval Islam*, 64.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 65.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 66.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 66–67.

3. The Exercise of Power

To save a caliphate plagued by flaring passions, growing corruption, and cutthroat factionalism, Ali believed that change was necessary, not only within the political sphere but within the religious sphere as well.¹⁶¹ He concluded that while they were still unquestionably valid, the Qur'an and the acts of Mohammad and the first three caliphs had to be "reinterpreted to meet the needs of the time."¹⁶² In adopting this premise, Ali demonstrated his willingness to imbue the post of caliph with greater religious power in an effort to accomplish political objectives more effectively.¹⁶³ On most matters, Ali took bold and decisive action: he enacted drastic measures to eliminate nepotism and corruption and to promote greater justice and equality throughout the caliphate. However, his inaction in several key instances resulted in a failure to quell the passions and overcome the factionalism that would eventually rip the umma apart.¹⁶⁴ The resultant Shi'a-Sunni split fuels conflict that still resonates to this day.

To deal with rampant nepotism, corruption, and injustice within the caliphate, Ali implemented three major changes. The first of these changes, effected early in his tenure, was the removal of many of the officials appointed by Uthman in what Saunders referred to as a "clean sweep" of the caliphate's leadership.¹⁶⁵ While this measure certainly addressed the main grievance that had been levied against Uthman, it angered those who wanted to preserve the status quo, including Talha, Zubayr, A'isha, and other prominent Qurayshites.¹⁶⁶ Resentment over the removal of Uthman's officials sparked the first major rebellion against Ali, which culminated in the Battle of the Camel discussed earlier. The second major change that Ali implemented was the leveling of the status of later Muslims with that of the earliest believers.¹⁶⁷ He recognized the importance of the

¹⁶¹ Shaban, *Islamic History*, 71–73.

¹⁶² Ibid., 73.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 72.

¹⁶⁵ Saunders, *History of Medieval Islam*, 64.

¹⁶⁶ Shaban, *Islamic History*, 71–72.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 72.

contributions made by later generations in expanding the empire and chose to give them an equal share of the wealth that the caliphate had accumulated.¹⁶⁸ This measure, while bolstering Ali's position in the eyes of much of the caliphate's periphery, fueled greater discontent among the elites within the core.¹⁶⁹ The third major change Ali pursued was the elimination of Syria's privileged status among the other provinces.¹⁷⁰ Under Umar and Uthman, Syria was shielded from receiving immigrants under the rationale that the province's proximity to the Byzantine Empire required it to be free from the immigration nuisance that challenged the other provinces.¹⁷¹ Ali believed that protecting one's borders was the responsibility of every province, and Syria deserved no special accommodations.¹⁷² Mu'awiya's disagreement was a large factor in the Syrian rebellion against Ali.¹⁷³ The nature of Ali's beliefs and actions attracted many disadvantaged factions to his camp, especially the ansar of Medina, the qurra of Kufa, and many former ridda leaders.¹⁷⁴ Unfortunately for Ali, factionalism and passion would eventually lead to the splintering of his own coalition that would lead to his eventual demise.

While many of Ali's bold actions generated substantial opposition to his rule, it was Ali's inaction at several critical points that eventually led to his demise—and the birth of the Shi'a-Sunni divide. The first instance occurred immediately after Ali assumed the mantle of caliph. While the Muslim community stood in shock over the assassination of Uthman, and with the powerful Umayyad family seething with anger, Ali allowed a perfect opportunity to strengthen his legitimacy escape by failing to vigorously pursue the third caliph's murders.¹⁷⁵ The second instance, which was equally damaging to Ali's legitimacy, occurred when he chose not to press his advantage against

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 74.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 72.

¹⁷⁵ Saunders, *History of Medieval Islam*, 64–65.

Mu’awiya’s forces in 657 and agreed to accept arbitration instead.¹⁷⁶ The Syrians were on the verge of defeat, and the victory could have asserted Ali’s dominance over the rebellious province and their leader.¹⁷⁷ Instead, Ali’s unwillingness to press the fight led to the splintering of his coalition and birth of the Kharijite rebellion, and the inconclusive results of the arbitration he allowed failed to settle the matter of leadership, dealing a severe blow to Ali’s legitimacy.¹⁷⁸

4. Evolution of the State under Ali

With a leader who openly embraced change, the caliphate was destined to evolve during Ali’s tenure. Ironically, despite his efforts to introduce meaningful reforms, the evolution that occurred was not what he intended. Three dramatic changes occurred during Ali’s five-year tenure. First, the caliphate essentially divided into two separate states over the question of rightful ownership of the caliph position. The insurrections led by Talha and Zubayr, Mu’awiya, and the Kharijites resulted in thousands of Muslim-on-Muslim deaths, but the inconclusive arbitration at Siffin left neither Ali nor Mu’awiya as the undisputed leader of the caliphate.¹⁷⁹ With Ali’s legitimacy and position immensely degraded, Mu’awiya was able to obtain Egypt’s loyalty and incorporate it into his sphere of control before he himself was proclaimed caliph in 660—six months before Ali’s assassination.¹⁸⁰

The second major change occurred within the community of believers. During Ali’s tumultuous reign, the umma—often divided in political interests but firmly united on religious grounds—fragmented into three separate communities. Mohammad had taught that the path to salvation required the followership of an appropriate religious authority, and the early community saw the precarious position of having to choose between loyalty to Ali, Mu’awiya, or neither as a test from God. Choosing incorrectly was akin to following a false imam and warranted eternal damnation. Believers

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 65; Shaban, *Islamic History*, 74–75.

¹⁷⁷ Esposito, *Islam*, 42; Saunders, *History of Medieval Islam*, 65.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 66–67.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 64–66.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 66–67.

essentially had three choices, and their selection placed them squarely in a new, separate community. Uthmanis believed that Uthman's reign was righteous, death was unjust, and cousin was the correct heir as caliph. Ali's party, the *Shi'at Ali* (or *Shi'a*), believed that Uthman's actions were immoral and his refusal to step down as caliph justified his assassination, making Ali was the rightful caliph. Kharijites believed that Ali's acceptance of arbitration at Siffin represented an abdication of caliphal authority, thus invalidating Ali's claim to power. This splitting of the umma laid the foundation for further divergence between the communities that would occur over the next 13-plus centuries.¹⁸¹

The third major change that occurred during Ali's reign was, as Saunders noted, the end of "pure theocracy" within the caliphate.¹⁸² As discussed earlier, the umma attributed a heavy significance to the religious leadership of the caliph. However, this significance was mostly symbolic; without the Prophethood status that Mohammad enjoyed, the post's actual religious authority was limited. Ali's attempt to introduce greater religious power to the caliph position ended in bitter failure, and Mu'awiya, learning from this lesson, avoided the pretense of religious authority when assuming the mantle of leadership after Ali's death. This veritable divorce of political and religious authority was symbolized by the relocation of the caliphate's political capital to Syria, while the religious center remained in the Hijaz.¹⁸³

F. SUMMARY

The reality of the revered Rightly Guided Caliphate period was extremely complex. On one level, the Rightly Guided Caliphate was extraordinarily successful: in the span of a few short decades, the humble state founded by Mohammad grew into one of the most powerful empires of its day, and its growth was accompanied by a new religious denomination that changed the character of Middle Eastern civilization. On another level, this astonishing expansion of both state and religion was not without

¹⁸¹ Crone, *God's Rule*, 21–23, 25.

¹⁸² Saunders, *History of Medieval Islam*, 68.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 68–69; Shaban, *Islamic History*, 79–80.

growing pains: three of the four Rightly Guided Caliphs were assassinated, two of which were by fellow Muslims; four major rebellions were violently repressed, which resulted in the tragedy of thousands of Muslim versus Muslim deaths; the unity of the umma was irrevocably damaged, leading to the eventual Sunni-Shi'a split; and civil war ripped the caliphate into two separate states near the end of the period. An examination of the composition, function, and evolution of the Rightly Guided Caliphate revealed two major, recurring themes: the constant influence of factionalism and group-interest posed a continual threat to the unity of the caliphate, and each caliphs' struggles to exert the necessary political and religious control over the growing state was resisted by elites and contributed to even greater factionalism and strife. These themes validate this chapter's hypothesis, which posited that the tremendous turmoil existent within the Rightly Guided Caliphate was a function of the political challenges the caliphs faced, and that the nature of those challenges drove them to respond in ways that do not appear to be consistent with the actions and teachings of the Prophet.

The first theme, the prevalence of factionalism throughout multiple levels of the empire, influenced the Rightly Guided Caliphs to rely much more on the use of force to subvert this powerful tendency than the Prophet did before them. Abu Bakr and Ali both faced insurrections that required military action to suppress. Abu Bakr, Umar, and to a lesser extent, Uthman, were forced to launch military campaigns to mitigate the negative effects of factionalism; tribal groups were encouraged to conduct external raids and participate in military expeditions to keep them from fighting each other, and the steady flow of booty into the treasury made it easier to forestall arguments between the elite factions within the core of the state over the allocation of resources. Similarly, Uthman's *failure* to use force probably contributed to his assassination at the hands of angry Egyptian and Iraqi factions.¹⁸⁴ The Rightly Guided Caliphs' necessary use of force contrasted with the Prophet's ability to obtain the loyalty of Arabian Bedouin factions and to hasten the ultimate fall of Mecca through savvy political maneuvering.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁴ Saunders, *History of Medieval Islam*, 62.

¹⁸⁵ Esposito, *Islam*, 9–11.

The second major theme that recurred throughout this chapter which validated its hypothesis was the struggle faced by each Rightly Guided Caliph to define or adapt their caliphal role to best address the challenges of the times. Unlike Mohammad, the caliphs did not enjoy the divine authority and status that Prophethood demanded, yet each was still responsible for adequately governing the state and providing religious leadership to the umma. As the caliphate grew, the number and complexity of the challenges increased, but any attempt to assume greater caliphal authority represented a conflict with some faction's interests and was vigorously opposed. Abu Bakr began as a part-time, unpaid caliph before the magnitude of problems before him convinced the umma that a full-time leader was necessary. Umar was said to have considered abolishing the post due to his inability to garner the political authority necessary to properly govern the growing state. Uthman's attempts to exert greater political and modestly increased religious authority, broadly seen as acts of nepotism and corruption, hastened his assassination. Ali's claim to greater political and religious power and desire to reinterpret key elements of Islamic tradition to enact important political reforms led to rebellion and civil war, creating a rift in the fabric of the umma that preceded the eventual Sunni-Shi'a divide. While the Rightly Guided Caliphs' attempts to expand their political and religious authority led to increased turmoil within the caliphate and were opposed on the grounds of exceeding the Prophet's mandate, they were undertaken in the interest of caliphal security and governmental efficiency.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 86; Saunders, *History of Medieval Islam*, 61; Shaban, *Islamic History*, 63, 66.

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III. CONTEMPORARY SALAFISM'S INTERPRETATION OF THE RIGHTLY GUIDED CALIPHATE

A. INTRODUCTION

As discussed in the preceding chapter, the Rightly Guided Caliphate period was tremendously complex. The era was marked by extraordinary expansion; a humble state became an empire and a young religious denomination established permanent roots in large portions of two continents during the reign of the four Rightly Guided Caliphs. Unfortunately, this remarkable expansion was accompanied by persistent turmoil and massive bloodshed, making contemporary Salafism's emulation of the period seem highly illogical. This chapter will discuss the contemporary Salafist narrative of the Rightly Guided Caliphate to establish the reasons why the period is so important to the movement. It will begin by providing the context necessary to understand this narrative, including an overview of the roots and doctrine of the contemporary Salafist movement and a brief overview of the various factions that comprise it. The chapter will then explore the narrative itself, looking at contemporary Salafists' treatment of the earliest Muslim leaders' beliefs and actions, acknowledgement or denial of the companions' misdeeds and any associated explanations for them, and perception of the unity of the umma during the period. The facts surrounding the history, doctrine, and narrative of the contemporary Salafist movement are expected to support the second major hypothesis this study will explore: contemporary Salafists ignore the negative aspects of the Rightly Guided Caliphate because they are prejudiced by a desire to reinvent the period in a way that better supports their religious and political objectives.

B. THE ROOTS AND DOCTRINE OF CONTEMPORARY SALAFISM

Although today's version is fundamentally different in many regards, contemporary Salafism is an extension of the modern Salafist movement that began in the late 1800s. Led by the visionary reformers Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Mohammad Abduh, and Rashid Rida, the modern Salafist movement addressed the decline of the Muslim world relative to the West by calling for internal reforms to strengthen the community

and its international position.¹⁸⁷ The movement's two earliest leaders, al-Afghani and Abduh, believed that the Islamic world failed to keep pace with the West because it resisted a reinterpretation of Islam (or *ijtihad*) that was necessary to retain its relevance.¹⁸⁸ They argued that while the core principles of Islam were absolute and unchangeable, the employment of those principles must be adapted to meet the needs of the times.¹⁸⁹ They blamed the decline of Islamic society on the traditionalists' rejection of reason, Sufi fatalism, and the exercise of folk practices such as saint worship and miracle working—and called for a reversal of these societal concepts.¹⁹⁰ Al-Afghani and Abduh also believed that Islam and science were fully compatible and that some aspects of Western civilization were worthy of emulation.¹⁹¹ Under the later leadership of Rida, however, the movement's ideology evolved into a version closer to what contemporary Salafists embrace today. Rida believed that Islam could solve the world's problems independently from other influences, was skeptical of Western values, and feared that the use of reason in the Muslim world would eventually lead to secularization.¹⁹² Instead of looking to the West for guidance, he admonished Muslims to look to the foundation of Islam: the Qur'an and the Sunna, as interpreted by the Prophet's companions.¹⁹³ Rida also advocated the restoration of the caliphate, believing that Islamic government was necessary to enforce Islamic law.¹⁹⁴

Although it has undergone a significant transformation since the Salafist revival of the 19th and 20th centuries, many of those earlier core beliefs are still found in the present day manifestation of the Salafist movement. The movement has seen significant growth, with a multitude of Salafist organizations in existence today. Nuances in

¹⁸⁷ Esposito, *Islam*, 154, 156.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 154, 156–57.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 156–58.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 156–57.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 154–55, 157.

¹⁹² Ibid., 160; Mahmoud Haddad, "Arab Religious Nationalism in the Colonial Era: Rereading Rashid Rida's Ideas on the Caliphate," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 117, no. 2 (April–June 1997), 253–54, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/605489>.

¹⁹³ Esposito, *Islam*, 160.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 159; Haddad, "Rereading Rashid Rida's Ideas on the Caliphate," 153, 261, 273.

intentions and methods are found among them, but these organizations all share a common religious doctrine. This doctrine (or *aqida*) is heavily predicated upon a belief in the oneness (*tawhid*) of God, calls for a strict adherence to the Qur'an and Sunna, and rejects all attempts to *innovate*, or deviate from, the unchangeable principles of God's word and the acts of the Prophet.

Tawhid, the central theme of contemporary Salafist doctrine, is comprised of three separate principles. Contemporary Salafists believe that the acceptance of all three is necessary to be a true Muslim, as they are all manifestations of belief. The first says that there is only one God, Allah, and that he alone created—and will forever rule—the universe. The second principle expresses the notion that God is wholly unique, and does not share power with any aspect of his creation. Therefore, God's law (or *Sharia*) is absolute, and mankind is obliged to follow it completely. Human-inspired institutions and laws must be rejected because they represent a usurpation of God's role and a challenge to His sovereignty. The third principle states that only God is worthy of worship. For contemporary Salafists, this not only means the forbiddance of practices like saint worship and prayer through intercessors, but also that one's actions in life must conform to the guidelines set forth in God's law, because life itself is an act of worship and any actions that stray from His guidance represent unfaithfulness to Him.¹⁹⁵

Contemporary Salafists' devotion to tawhid is accompanied by a zealous adherence to the Qur'an and the Sunna (as observed by the companions of the Prophet). They believe that the protection of tawhid requires both the stringent application of these two fundamental sources of Islam and the rejection of all other external sources. Otherwise, Muslims open the door to potential deviation from the true path by intentional and unintentional innovation (or *bid'a*). Interestingly, Wiktorowicz noted that the ambiguity of many Qur'anic passages poses a challenge for contemporary Salafists seeking to apply them to modern problems. As a result, the hadith's role is extremely important to them, as he says, "perhaps even more important to Salafis than the Qur'an itself."¹⁹⁶ Consequently, the observations of the Prophet's companions that are recorded

¹⁹⁵ Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement," 208–9.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 214.

within those hadiths—which occurred, of course, during the Rightly Guided Caliphate period—are of tremendous value to contemporary Salafists of all stripes.¹⁹⁷

The contemporary Salafists' understanding of tawhid and the Qur'an and Sunna engender two important beliefs shared by each of their organizations. First, contemporary Salafists believe that they, alone, represent a saved sect that was prophesized by Mohammad as a result of their strict adherence to the Qur'an and Sunna, which the Prophet commanded. In his words, "I am leaving you with two things and you will never go astray as long as you cling to them. They are the Book of Allah and my Sunna."¹⁹⁸ In the contemporary Salafist view, the other 72 of the 73 Muslim sects mentioned by Mohammad are doomed to hellfire because they are not "upon what I [Mohammad] and my Companions are upon."¹⁹⁹ Second, contemporary Salafists see themselves as being "embroiled in a battle against the rationalists and human desire."²⁰⁰ Contemporary Salafists zealously fight against both of these corrupting influences, which they believe have the capacity to contaminate Islam and lead the community astray.²⁰¹ To guard against contamination, contemporary Salafists call for a return to the formative period of Islam, which they consider to be pure. Since knowledge is appreciated as an important weapon in their battle against innovation, contemporary Salafists place heavy emphasis on religious scholarship.²⁰² Each Salafist organization's pursuit of knowledge links it with a shared educational network, which in turn perpetuates the common belief structure found amongst them all.²⁰³

C. SALAFIST ORGANIZATIONS

Although they share the common belief structure previously discussed, contemporary Salafist organizations differ greatly on their preferred means for realizing

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 209.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 212.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 210, 212.

²⁰² Ibid., 212–13.

²⁰³ Ibid., 212.

the purification of Islamic society they so desire. As Wiktorowicz explains, these organizations can be best classified as belonging to one of three factions: the more established and traditional *purists*, the younger generation of *politicos*, and the radically-minded *jihadis*.²⁰⁴ While all contemporary Salafists view themselves as being engaged in a constant struggle against the forces of innovation and believe that every Salafist faction espouses the correct belief structure, each of the three factions believes that they, alone, are following the guidance of Mohammad properly through their own unique methods of purifying Islamic society.²⁰⁵

As the name implies, *purists* champion a methodology they believe to be the most pure of all contemporary Salafist factions. Their primary focus is on the purification of Islam and the protection of their religion from all corrupting influences—whether internal or external. Purists believe that the purification of Islam must be the primary goal of Salafists because political activism and the application of violence are both counterproductive methods that could do greater damage to Islamic society than good. They cite the example of Mohammad during the earliest days of Islam, when his small group of believers was living under the constant threat of annihilation by Meccan elites. Instead of fomenting insurrection and conspiracy, the Prophet was able to spread Islam in a peaceful and subtle manner on the strength of its own merits. If Mohammad was able to successfully propagate Islam in this manner, purists argue, the use of politics and violence in today's world are unnecessary innovations that contradict the Prophetic model.²⁰⁶

Purists see another parallel between Mohammad's earliest Meccan days and the present: they believe that the very existence of Islam is threatened today, just as it was before the *Hijra* (the Prophet's flight to Medina in 622). Purists believe that the West is determined to destroy Islam by undermining Muslim values and replacing them with Western ones.²⁰⁷ To protect Islam from this external threat, like the Prophet did long

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 216–217.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 216–17.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 217.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 217–18.

ago, purists call for the promulgation of Salafist beliefs through purification, knowledge, and education.²⁰⁸ Politics and violence are rejected as innovation because the Prophet did not use those methods. While most purists believe their politically- and violence-oriented colleagues are well-intentioned, they believe the latter two factions present a grave internal threat to Islam because politicos and jihadis assign a higher degree of importance to their own goals than to the purification of Islam and allow reason and strategy to determine how they will use religious evidence to advance their causes (as opposed to allowing the message of Islam to speak for itself, like Mohammad did).²⁰⁹ As a result of their fixation with purity, the purists have largely isolated themselves, actively avoiding dialogue with non-Muslims and blocking their followers' exposure to alternate Salafist viewpoints—even in cases where the motive is to seek evidence for counter-argument.²¹⁰ Consequently, purist Salafism is simultaneously peaceful, yet uncompromising. The main source of purist Salafism is the Saudi Arabian religious establishment, where purist leadership remains deeply entrenched.²¹¹

Like the purists, Salafi *politicos* are staunchly committed to the Salafist creed, the protection of tawhid, and the purification of Islamic society. Additionally, the politicos share (if not surpass) the purists' disdain for and mistrust of the West, believing that Western influence in Muslim lands presents a severe threat to Islam itself.²¹² The point of departure for politicos is their view that the purists' apolitical stance—in an age where both corrupt Muslim leaders and unchecked Western influence endanger the sanctity of tawhid and the purity of Islam—invalidates purist methodology.²¹³ Instead, the politicos believe that political activism is required to establish the temporal conditions necessary for the proper defense of Islam. They view political action as not only necessary as a matter of practicality, but also as being morally obligatory. Politicos admonish Muslims

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 217.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 220.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 219, 221.

²¹¹ Ibid., 221.

²¹² Ibid., 222–23.

²¹³ Ibid., 223.

to familiarize themselves with current events, engage in political discussion, and evaluate their rulers in order to adequately protect Islam from corrupting influences, even those that may come from within.²¹⁴

While they sharply disagree with the purists' opposition to political activism, politicos largely respect their elder faction's religious scholarship and knowledge. Despite this acknowledgement of the purists' religious expertise, however, politicos believe that the purists' limited knowledge and experience with current events and international affairs precludes effective judgment and religious leadership. Within Saudi Arabia—the seat of contemporary Salafism—the division between purists and politicos was solidified in the wake of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990.²¹⁵ Presumably under pressure from the Saudi rulers, the leaders of the purist camp issued a fatwa accepting the presence of U.S. troops in the Holy Land as a response to Saddam Hussein's aggression.²¹⁶ Politicos publicly disagreed with the fatwa, arguing that the purists failed to understand the true Western motivation behind the deployment—gaining a foothold from which the Muslim world would eventually be subjugated.²¹⁷ For politicos, the purists' stance was evidence of their limited understanding of world events, borne from decades of conscious avoidance of politics. From the purist perspective, the politicos' willingness to engage in political action is perilous because the latter is too young, inexperienced, and ignorant of Islamic theology to use politics effectively. Purists argue that political action without adequate religious knowledge invites emotion and rationalism, which endangers Islam. The disagreement between the two factions has become known as the debate over the jurisprudence of current affairs (or *al-fiqh al-waqi*), and in many ways represents a not only a dispute between opposing viewpoints, but a generational struggle (between the older purists and younger politicos) as well.²¹⁸

²¹⁴ Ibid., 222, 224–25.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 222–23.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 223.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 224.

Although the purists' apolitical version of Salafism remains the most dominant among the three factions, political activism is on the rise among Salafist and Salafism-inspired groups. Besides Saudi Arabia, where the influence of politicos has grown significantly since the 1980s and 90s, Salafists have entered into politics elsewhere. While political parties are not technically permitted in Kuwait and Bahrain, Salafists in each of those states have held well-established blocs within their parliaments for several decades. The advent of the Arab Spring has also fueled Salafi political activism, as Salafist political groups have emerged to attempt to influence the direction of governance in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Lebanon during the last two years. Though they represent but a minority of the population in each of those countries, the appeal of Salafi political parties continues to rise as they provide an alternative to liberal-minded parties and moderate Islamist parties like the Muslim Brotherhood.²¹⁹

The third major faction within the contemporary Salafist movement is the *jihadi* faction. Jihadis share a common goal with their purist and politico counterparts: the purification of Islamic society through protection of tawhid and strict adherence to the Qur'an and Sunna. However, the point of departure for jihadis lies in their preferred methodology for achieving this purification, as they encourage the use of violence over education, example, and political activism.²²⁰ Whereas most contemporary Salafist scholars strongly dispute the legitimacy of violence, jihadis consider its use to be justifiable because of the significance of the threat posed to Islam by Western influence.²²¹ To counter this profound threat, jihadis argue, jihad represents a legitimate form of da'wa (propagation of Islam) that must be used to purge the Islamic world of

²¹⁹ Will McCants, "A New Salafi Politics," Project on Middle East Political Science Briefing 14, October 16, 2012, http://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/POMEPS_BriefBooklet14_Salafi_web.pdf, 6-8; Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement," 221; Will McCants, "Joining the Fray: Salafi Politics after the Arab Spring," *World Politics Review* (January 22, 2013), <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/12655/joining-the-fray-salafi-politics-after-the-arab-spring>.

²²⁰ Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement," 225.

²²¹ Christopher Blanchard, *The Islamic Traditions of Wahhabism and Salafiyah* (RS21695) (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2008), 4.

corrupting Western influence and establish an Islamic society that is free from it.²²² Like politicos, the trajectory of Salafist jihadism has been influenced heavily by a disagreement with both the Saudi government and purists on the issue of allowing Western military forces to be based on Saudi holy land.²²³

The roots of Salafist jihadism can be traced to the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. Saudi and other Arab Salafists who traveled to Afghanistan to fight with the mujahedeen were introduced to the radicalized version of Islam espoused by organizations like the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic Jihad, and the experience of combat against the infidel invaders further solidified their belief in the relevance of violence in protecting and purifying Islamic society.²²⁴ Throughout the 1990s, Salafist jihadis who returned to Saudi Arabia became disenchanted by both the government's repression of leading politicos who spoke out against the hosting of American forces and their perception that purists supported the government's actions. During this period, the jihadis' relationship with the purists became much more adversarial. Jihadis argued that the purists' blind support of Saudi rulers under these circumstances was indicative of an inability to properly interpret and convey Islam to the community of believers. Since politicos and jihadis had demonstrated a willingness to oppose the government's relationship with the West, they alone were free from undue influence and thus represented the only agents properly equipped to interpret and reveal the truth of Islam.²²⁵

For jihadis, mere opposition to pro-Western governmental policies is insufficient in many cases where the sanctity of Tawhid is at stake. Jihadis believe that regimes presiding over Muslim countries and who are unwilling to divorce themselves from Western influence and any associated secular tendencies can be declared apostates,

²²² Ahmad Moussalli, "Wahhabism, Salafism and Islamism: Who is the Enemy?" *A Conflict Forum Monograph* (January 30, 2009), 21.

²²³ Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement," 225.

²²⁴ Blanchard, *The Islamic Traditions*, 4.

²²⁵ Ibid., 225–27.

through a process known as *takfir*, and legitimately overthrown.²²⁶ While all three contemporary Salafist factions agree that the concept of takfir is a valid one, its applicability in the case of Muslim rulers is widely disputed amongst them. Purists argue that Muslim rulers, despite their fallibility, have shown no evidence of rejecting Islam in their hearts, and therefore cannot be declared apostates.²²⁷ Conversely, Jihadis and politicos argue that one's true beliefs can be inferred through his or her actions, so rulers observed engaging in un-Islamic practices can be rightfully determined to have rejected Islam.²²⁸ In the jihadi view, such apostate rulers must be removed—by force, if necessary. In addition to their ongoing conflicts with the West, prominent Salafist jihadi organizations such as al-Qaeda, the al-Nusra Front, and Ansar al-Sunna have attempted to overthrow the Saudi, Syrian, and Iraqi regimes on the grounds of takfir.

D. THE NARRATIVE

To ascertain the importance of the Rightly Guided Caliphate to the contemporary Salafist movement, this study examined a range of sources, including the works of prominent purist Salafi scholars Mohammad Nasiruddin al-Albani and Aziz bin Baz, politico Salafist leader Safar al-Hawali, and well-known Salafist jihadis Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri. Despite their differences about proper means for purifying Islamic society, each of these leaders espoused similar beliefs about the nature of the Rightly Guided Caliphate period and about the caliphs and the Prophet's companions themselves whose actions shaped its history. The narrative regarding four specific topics is useful in obtaining a deeper understanding of the importance of the period and why it is revered by contemporary Salafists: the Rightly Guided Caliphs' and fellow companions' beliefs and actions, the existence of and reasons behind caliphal misdeeds, the unity of the umma during the Rightly Guided Caliphate period, and the emergence of the Sunni-Shi'a rift. Each of these topics are described in detail below.

²²⁶ Ibid., 228.

²²⁷ Ibid., 234.

²²⁸ Ibid.

1. Views on the Caliphs' and Companions' Beliefs and Actions

Since the beliefs and actions of the Rightly Guided Caliphs and their fellow companions played a crucial role in shaping the trajectory of Islam during the critical years following the Prophet's death, an examination of the contemporary Salafist narrative regarding this topic is useful in obtaining a greater understanding of why the period is so important to them. Two key concepts are found in this narrative: the infallibility of the actions of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, their fellow companions, and the entire umma *as a group* and their combined dedication to preserving the sanctity of Islam. For contemporary Salafists, in addition to the Prophet's command to do so, this notion of infallibility and belief in the companions' zealous defense against impurity forms the basis for why modern-day Muslims are determined to follow their example.

The central theme of the contemporary Salafist narrative concerning the beliefs and actions of the Rightly Guided Caliphs and the other companions of the Prophet focuses on the infallibility of the group as a whole. In one of his famous fatwas, al-Albani discussed this notion of infallibility when he explained that “one who ascribes himself to the Salaf As-Saalihi (righteous predecessors) . . . ascribes himself to infallibility”²²⁹ and by declaring that “there is the infallibility of the Companions of the Prophet, *sall Allaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*, [meaning *peace upon him*] (as a whole).”²³⁰ For contemporary Salafists, this infallibility was characterized in several different ways. In his fatwa “the Sacred Salafee Methodology,” al-Albani explained that the actions of the companions were righteous and worthy of emulation because these earliest Muslims were “all upon true guidance from their Lord” as they had “learnt from the Revelation which was sent down upon the heart of their Prophet (*sallallaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*), fresh and pure, just as it was revealed.”²³¹ Service of and submission to God was also an important trait that was manifested by these earliest Muslims, as Safar al-Hawali explained:

The Companions and the righteous predecessors understood the Book of Allah and implemented it in knowledge and action, and they knew the

²²⁹ Alarcon, *Fataawaa of Shaikh Al-Albaanee*, 23.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

²³¹ Al-Albani, “The Sacred Salafee Methodology.”

importance of the actions of the heart such as sincerity, certainty, truthfulness, love, etc. As a result, they became true manifestations of complete servitude to Allah.²³²

The second major theme found in the contemporary Salafist narrative regarding the beliefs and actions of the Rightly Guided Caliphs and the other companions addresses their stance on preserving the purity of Islam. These earliest Muslims are seen as not only infallible in thought and action, but also as defenders against innovation. In his fatwa “The Authentic Creed and the Invalidators of Islam,” bin Baz explained how the companions revered tawhid and held to the creed that they “should believe in all His Attributes without changing them, completely ignoring them, twisting their meanings, or claiming that they resemble human attributes.”²³³ Al-Albani added that “our righteous ancestors were furious in their anger against whoever preferred sayings . . . or the opinion of any person, whoever he was, to the Hadith of the Messenger of Allah.”²³⁴ Unsurprisingly, Salafist jihadis cast the Rightly Guided Caliphs’ defense against innovation in an even more aggressive light. In a treatise discussing the importance of adopting Sharia in the wake of the Arab Spring, al-Zawahiri wrote that the “rightly-guided caliphs” were willing to “do jihad” to prevent the separation of Islam from politics.²³⁵ According to Salafist jihadis, the rejection of Sharia is an innovation. For all contemporary Salafists, the companions provided modern Muslims with an example to be emulated not only through their submission to God’s will, but by vehemently protecting Islam from impurity.

2. Treatment of Misdeeds

While contemporary Salafists consider the Rightly Guided Caliphs and the other companions to have been infallible *as a group* due to their nearness to the Prophet, devotion to tawhid, and willing subservience to God, these earliest Muslims are not viewed as infallible *as individuals*. Although very little is said about the actual misdeeds

²³² Al-Hawali, “When the Ummah Deviated.”

²³³ Bin Baz, “The Authentic Creed,” 7.

²³⁴ Al-Albani, *Proof Itself*, 14.

²³⁵ Al-Zawahiri, “Shariah-Based Governance,” 3.

of the Rightly Guided Caliphs and companions, several contemporary Salafist scholars acknowledged or hinted that transgressions did occur. Despite these acknowledgements, however, individual misdeeds are assigned a low level of importance because the broader lesson—that the Rightly Guided Caliphs and companions, as a group, were faithful to God and to the teachings of the Prophet—is considered to be far more important.

Within the contemporary Salafist narrative, several notable examples can be found where misdeeds of the Rightly Guided Caliphs and other companions of the Prophet were acknowledged. In “The Advice of Shaykhul-Islaam Ibn Baaz (D. 1420H) to Usaamah Ibn Laadin al-Khaarijee,” bin Baz refuted the practice of criticizing rulers through the recounting of a hadith. He explained how the Prophet’s beloved companion Usama ibn Zaid was once asked about his relationship with Uthman and whether he had ever confronted Uthman about potential wrong-doings.²³⁶ Usama did not deny that he had discussed such matters with the third Caliph, but exclaimed that anything spoken behind closed doors was no one else’s business.²³⁷ In addition to reinforcing the purist belief that rulers’ actions must not be judged without incontestable cause, Bin Baz’s perspective implies that Uthman’s actions, taken individually, were not infallible. In his fatwa “The Authentic Creed and the Invalidators of Islam,” bin Baz explained that one of the reasons why the companions should be revered by modern-day Muslims was because “they [kept] their tongue in check regarding the arguments that arose amongst them and [believed] that they did their best to do only that which they believed was right.”²³⁸ This supports the theme that while disagreements and transgressions did occur, the companions, as a group, sought to act righteously. Two additional examples are found in al-Albani’s writings. In “The Sacred Salafee Methodology,” he too mentioned that the Salaf had disagreements amongst themselves and “[fell] into unintentional error at times.”²³⁹ In “Fataawaa of Shaikh Al-Albaanee,” he added that since the Rightly Guided Caliphs and companions of the Prophet are not individually infallible, they must not be

²³⁶ Bin Baz, “The Advice of Shaykhul-Islaam Ibn Baaz,” 2.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Bin Baz, “The Authentic Creed,” 19.

²³⁹ Al-Albani, “Sacred Salafee Methodology.”

followed as individuals; instead, modern Muslims should heed their example and devote themselves only “to one individual . . . the Messenger of Allaah.”²⁴⁰

While several contemporary Salafist scholars have acknowledged that the Rightly Guided Caliphs and companions of the Prophet, as individuals, were not perfect, disagreements and missteps are largely overlooked due to the greater importance of their generation’s devotion to God and His Messenger as a group. An examination of these scholars’ writings reveals one specific reason why these transgressions are believed to have occurred: limited access to the hadiths. In “The Sacred Salafee Methodology,” al-Albani explained that the Salaf were in full concurrence about the fundamental principles of Islam and the importance of referring to the Qur’an and Sunna when disagreements needed to be settled. However, at times, certain companions erred because they did not have access to a specific hadith that would have sufficiently addressed the question at hand. Though they were sometimes wrong, al-Albani wrote that these erring companions still acted appropriately by using their best judgment based on the information available to them at the time. He recounted that the Prophet foresaw this problem of limited access to hadiths when he decreed that “if an arbitrator gives a verdict based upon his personal reasoning (ijtihaad) and he is correct in that verdict, then he receives two rewards. And if he makes an error then he receives only one.”²⁴¹ For contemporary Salafists, the *individuals* who led the Umma during the Rightly Guided Caliphate period were not perfect—and this is especially true of those with limited knowledge of the Prophet’s actions and teachings—but their generation’s devotion to God and the Prophet *as a whole* exudes the infallibility that is worthy of emulation by modern believers.²⁴²

3. Views on the Unity of the Umma

Another topic associated with the Rightly Guided Caliphate that informs contemporary Salafist beliefs is their interpretation of the unity of the umma during this formative period. As discussed earlier, contemporary Salafist scholars do not deny that

²⁴⁰ Isma’el Alarcon, *Fataawa of Shaikh Al-Albaanee*, 26.

²⁴¹ Al-Albani, “Sacred Salafee Methodology.”

²⁴² *Ibid.*

individual leaders erred during this time, but as a whole, the Salaf is remembered as being strongly united in its faith and interpretation of Islam. In his essay entitled “Knowledge,” bin Baz explained that the companions, despite minor disagreements, were still completely unified on the most important issues, writing that “their call was one and their way was one, calling to the Book of Allaah and the Sunnah of the Messenger.”²⁴³ This notion is reinforced by al-Albani, who wrote in his fatwa “The Sacred Salafee Methodology” that “the Salaf never disputed nor disagreed about the fundamentals of the Religion.”²⁴⁴ Contemporary Salafists of the jihadi inclination have taken the unity of the umma during the Rightly Guided Caliphate a step further and heavily romanticized it. Bin Laden harkened back to this unity when he proclaimed that the 9/11 attacks had reawakened a “spirit of brotherhood amongst Muslims” which would lead to “the unification of Muslims under the oneness of God and toward the establishment of the rightly guided caliphate.”²⁴⁵ The al-Qaeda mastermind also declared that Mohammad predicted the return of the Rightly Guided Caliphate, and with it, the unity that once characterized its umma.²⁴⁶

Regarding the turmoil that characterized the period, the contemporary Salafist narrative does not deny that an exceedingly strong umma began to fracture, despite the faithfulness of the Salaf. Contemporary Salafist scholars recount that the Prophet himself foresaw this. Al-Albani discussed Mohammad’s prediction that the umma would begin to fracture when it started to stray from the beliefs and actions he and his companions exhibited. Like other religions, the Prophet warned that the umma would break up into multiple sects, saying “the Jews have split and divided into seventy-one sects and the Christians have split and divided into seventy-two sects and my Ummah would split into seventy-three sects. All of these sects will be in the Fire except one.”²⁴⁷ When asked which sect would be saved, the Prophet replied, “the one that adheres to what I and my

²⁴³ Bin Baz, “Knowledge,” 15.

²⁴⁴ Al-Albani, “Sacred Salafee Methodology.”

²⁴⁵ Gelvin, “Al-Qaeda and Anarchism,” 574.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 573.

²⁴⁷ Al-Albani, “Sacred Salafee Methodology.”

Companions adhere to.”²⁴⁸ In the same fatwa, al-Albani later explained that this fracturing occurred “even during the first century [of Islam] when some deviant sects started raising their voices and calling to that which contradicted the Qur’aan and the Sunnah by following their vain desires.”²⁴⁹ One of those deviant groups he referred to were the Kharijites. Bin Baz expounded upon the damaging effects of the Kharijites, who “opposed ‘Uthmaan openly,” sparking the “fighting and corruption which has not ceased to affect the people to this day . . . and this caused the *fitnah* [or conflict] to occur between ‘Alee and Mu’awiyah.”²⁵⁰ Bin Baz added that “a large number of Companions and others besides them were killed due to this open rebellion.”²⁵¹ Thus, the strong unity of the umma during the Rightly Guided Caliphate period is seen as having begun to unravel as a result of the deviancy of the Kharijites.

4. Perspective on the Sunni-Shi'a Rift

For contemporary Salafists, the Kharijites are not the only deviant sect originating during the formative years of Islam that has had a negative effect on the trajectory of the Muslim faith. Considered to be similarly damaging are the Shi'a, who trace their roots back to and revere the reign of Ali, the fourth caliph. The Shi'a believe that Ali's familial relationship with the Prophet should have solidified his place as the rightful successor and first caliph, and they lament the rejection of a hereditary system to replace each caliph after Mohammad's death. These notions are not looked upon favorably by contemporary Salafists. Bin Baz makes his movement's position on the Shi'a very clear. In “The Authentic Creed,” he relates that “they (the Sheites) hate the Prophet's Companions, blaspheme them, and place the Prophet's family members in a position higher than that Allah chose for them.”²⁵² Bin Baz later explained that the Shi'a are just as deviant as “those who worship idols, angels, saints, the jinn, trees, and stones” and

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Bin Baz, “The Advice of Shaykhul-Islaam Ibn Baaz,” 2.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Bin Baz, “The Authentic Creed,” 19.

therefore “have not followed the call of Allah’s Messengers.”²⁵³ They are likened to the Meccan idolaters who rejected the Prophet’s call to worship Allah during the earliest days of Islam.²⁵⁴

While the contemporary Salafists’ scorn for the Shi’ā sect is quite blatant, their narrative speaks no ill of the caliph Ali himself. As noted earlier, al-Albani and bin-Baz blame the Kharijites for inciting the rebellion that led to the assassination of Uthman, the rift between Ali and Mu’awiyah, and the situation that forced the umma to choose sides in the civil war that set the conditions for the eventual divorce between Sunni and Shi’ā.²⁵⁵ Indeed, the true formation of a Shi’ā sect did not occur until well after the death of Ali. Alienated by Mu’awiyah and his successor Yazid, Ali’s former followers convinced the fourth caliph’s son Hussein to lead a rebellion against the Umayyads and assume leadership of the caliphate by virtue of his blood ties to Mohammad.²⁵⁶ Unable to garner strong support, Hussein’s army was slaughtered by Umayyad forces near Karbala, Iraq.²⁵⁷ This lopsided defeat reinforced the Shi’ā perspective that the Umayyads had inflicted great injustice against Ali’s family and solidified their resolve to break with their fellow Muslims.²⁵⁸ This party of Ali (*Shi’at Ali*, shortened to *Shi’ā*) then began to develop its own religious traditions, practices, and leadership. No indication was found in this study of the contemporary Salafist narrative that Ali should be blamed for the umma’s fracturing. Like the transgressions of each of the other Rightly Guided Caliphs, any misdeeds committed by Ali are considered by contemporary Salafists to be of minor import because of his place within the righteous early generation of Muslims.

²⁵³ Ibid., 20.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Al-Albani, “Sacred Salafee Methodology;” Bin Baz, “The Advice of Shaykhul-Islaam Ibn Baaz,” 2, 8.

²⁵⁶ Esposito, *Islam*, 47–48; Crone, *God’s Rule*, 24.

²⁵⁷ Esposito, *Islam*, 47–48; Crone, *God’s Rule*, 24.

²⁵⁸ Esposito, *Islam*, 48; Crone, *God’s Rule*, 24.

E. SUMMARY

Contemporary Salafism is the successor of the modern Salafist movement that began in the late 1800s. In response to the perceived decline of Muslim society in relation to the West, the modern Salafist movement advocated reforms within Islam to remedy that divergence. Today, the movement seeks to return Muslim society to a pure and uncorrupted state. The ideal example for belief and action, as specified by the Prophet, was the generation of Muslims who followed him—the righteous Salaf. While differing factions within the contemporary Salafist movement advocate different means to achieve this return to the purity of the Salaf—purists favor knowledge and education, politicos favor political activism, and jihadis favor violence—they all share a belief in a common doctrine centered on the oneness of God (*tawhid*), strict adherence to the Qur'an and Sunna, and rejection of innovation (*bid'a*). Since contemporary Salafists see Muslim society during the formative period of Islam as the embodiment of the principles they hold dear, much has been written about their beloved righteous predecessors.

An examination of the contemporary Salafist narrative about the formative period of Islam, which includes the Rightly Guided Caliphate period, found several important themes. First, the Salaf, in its entirety, is considered to be infallible. This notion is taken directly from the Prophet's declaration that his companions formed the greatest generation of Muslims because of their devotion to the Qur'an and Sunna and the contemporary Salafists' interpretation that the Salaf vigorously opposed innovation. Second, any misdeeds committed by the Rightly Guided Caliphs, the companions of the Prophet, and other members of this honored generation do not detract from the Salaf's faithfulness as a whole to the Qur'an and Sunna and were usually caused by a gaps in specific individuals' access to and understanding of those two religious sources. Third, the unity of the umma during the formative period of Islam was exceptionally strong, but it began to fray when deviant factions abandoned their devotion to the Qur'an and Sunna and fomented rebellion that eventually ripped the umma apart. Fourth, the rift between Sunni and Shi'a, as detestable as contemporary Salafists believe the Shi'a became, was not portrayed as Ali's doing. As one of the most important members of the righteous

Salaf, Ali is revered with the other Rightly Guided Caliphs. Instead, Kharijites are blamed for opening the rift that led to the eventual divorce of Sunni and Shi'a.

These themes partially invalidate one aspect of this study's second major hypothesis, which incorrectly assumed that the negative aspects of the Rightly Guided Caliphate were completely ignored. To be sure, negative themes are paid little mention, but they are not wholly disregarded. This study found that negative aspects of the Rightly Guided Caliphate, particularly the misdeeds of individuals within the Salaf, are indeed acknowledged. In the case of those of the umma who were faithful, the misdeeds are downplayed as being far less important when contrasted with the righteousness of this early Muslim generation as a whole, and disagreements are said to have been the result of limited knowledge of the pertinent aspects of the Prophet's Sunna. For the most blatant aspects of the period's turmoil, particularly Uthman's assassination and the civil war that broke out between the followers of Ali and Mu'awiyah, the rebellious Kharijites are given the blame.

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IV. COMPETING ACCOUNTS

A. INTRODUCTION

In pursuit of an answer for why contemporary Salafists revere the Rightly Guided Caliphate period despite the turmoil and bloodshed that underlined it, this study has examined both the traditional historical account and the contemporary Salafist narrative of the period to better understand this apparent paradox. An examination of the writings of several prominent Middle Eastern historians found that two important themes persisted during the period: the unity of the caliphate was perpetually threatened by factionalism and self-interest, and caliphal attempts to exert adequate political and religious control over the burgeoning empire were resisted on numerous levels, creating even more discord between its various factions. A review of the contemporary Salafist narrative, derived from the teachings of some of the movement's most influential leaders, espoused several of its own major themes. First, contemporary Salafists regard the generation of Muslims living during the Rightly Guided Caliphate period, as a whole, to have been infallible due to their devotion to tawhid and subservience to God. Second, members of this venerated generation are not considered to be infallible as individuals; they did commit misdeeds and have disagreements, but the transgressions are of such minor importance that they do not detract from the collective righteousness of the group as a whole. Third, the unity of the umma during this period was exceptionally strong, even after deviant factions began to undermine it during Uthman's tenure. Fourth, Caliph Ali is not blamed for either the conflict between him and Mu'awiyah or the later formalization of the Shi'a sect, which contemporary Salafists consider deviant.

Using the major themes collected from both accounts of the Rightly Guided Caliphate period, this chapter will outline the similarities and differences between the two versions to better understand the context of the contemporary Salafist narrative. Proper context will show that the contemporary Salafist movement reveres the Rightly Guided Caliphate, despite its negative aspects, for two main reasons. First, as the Prophet alluded—and contemporary Salafists interpret literally—the Rightly Guided Caliphate period is a time of nearly-perfect *religious purity*. While that condition alone is highly

worthy of emulation, a second reason explains why contemporary Salafists are truly engrossed with the period: the Rightly Guided Caliphate's tremendous *temporal power*. Despite other attractive periods in Muslim history, including the golden age that occurred several centuries later, the formative years of Islam represent both the *spiritual* and *temporal* pinnacle of Islamic society for the contemporary Salafist movement.

B. COMMONALITIES WITHIN THE ACCOUNTS

While a cursory glance at the traditional historical and contemporary Salafist accounts of the Rightly Guided Caliphate period seems to indicate the existence of two vastly different interpretations, a number of important similarities can be found between the two. First, both accounts explain that key leaders within the righteous Salaf—from the caliphs themselves to the other companions of the Prophet—were not without their faults; disagreements did occur, and misdeeds were committed. During the tumultuous years of Uthman's reign, the traditional account discusses the displeasure of the elites within the state, which included many of the Prophet's closest companions, over several caliphal policies that limited their influence.²⁵⁹ When angry Egyptian and Iraqi factions encircled the caliph's home for nearly 50 days and demanded his resignation on charges of nepotism and corruption, the companions stood by idly, tacitly allowing Uthman to be murdered.²⁶⁰ Likewise, within the contemporary Salafist narrative, the existence of disagreements between Uthman and the other companions in the months leading up to his assassination were acknowledged, and a small signal was given that some of Uthman's actions may have indeed been corrupt.²⁶¹

Second, both accounts reflect the existence of extreme internal strife within the caliphate, especially the rebellion against Uthman that led to his assassination and the civil war that ensued between the followers of Ali and Mu'awiyah. As mentioned earlier, the traditional historical account discussed the circumstances surrounding Uthman's murder at great length, describing the alienating effect that Uthman's policies had on the

²⁵⁹ Shaban, *Islamic History*, 70; Saunders, *History of Medieval Islam*, 62.

²⁶⁰ Shaban, *Islamic History*, 70–71; Saunders, *History of Medieval Islam*, 62–63.

²⁶¹ Al-Albani, “Sacred Salafee Methodology.”

Egyptian and Iraqi provinces, the frenzied mob that demanded his resignation, and the cold-blooded manner in which he was cut down.²⁶² The contemporary Salafist account alluded to the troubling situation as well, deriding the rebellious spirit of deviant Kharijites that fomented the controversy in the first place and later carried out the assassination.²⁶³ Similarly, the strife that existed between Ali and Mu'awiyah was chronicled within both the traditional historical sources and the contemporary Salafist narrative. Both accounts mention the existence of rebellion and the large number of Muslim deaths that resulted—including those of a number of the companions themselves.²⁶⁴

Third, when considering the *practice of Islam*, both accounts show that there was great unity throughout the umma during the Rightly Guided Caliphate period. Religiously, the Salaf were extremely loyal to the Qur'an and Sunna of the Prophet, and only minor differences in the earliest generation's interpretation of Islam were mentioned by either source. This religious unity was discussed exhaustively within the contemporary Salafist narrative by all key leaders surveyed in this study, including purists, political activists, and jihadis. The traditional historical account also acknowledges the religious unity of the Salaf, despite the extreme political factionalism that was present at the time. In *God's Rule—Government and Islam: Six Centuries of Medieval Islamic Political Thought*, Crone provided an excellent explanation. She likened the umma to a caravan traveling through the desert, following one path, behind the leadership of a knowledgeable guide.²⁶⁵ Just as members of a caravan could go astray if they did not follow the correct path, the umma was united in its practice of Islam as it navigated life and made its way along the only route to salvation.²⁶⁶

²⁶² Shaban, *Islamic History*, 70–71; Saunders, *History of Medieval Islam*, 62–63.

²⁶³ Al-Albani, "Sacred Salafee Methodology;" Bin Baz, "The Advice of Shaykhul-Islaam Ibn Baaz," 2, 8.

²⁶⁴ Shaban, *Islamic History*, 70–71; Saunders, *History of Medieval Islam*, 62–63; Bin Baz, "The Advice of Shaykhul-Islaam Ibn Baaz," 2, 8.

²⁶⁵ Crone, *God's Rule*, 21–23.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

These three major similarities between the two accounts of the Rightly Guided Caliphate period reinforce the notion that the Salaf, as a whole, was extremely pious and that its members exercised their faith in a manner profoundly similar to the example given by the Prophet. Though its leaders were imperfect, political and religious disagreements did occur, and significant bloodshed resulted from the worst disputes, the Rightly Guided Caliphate period was indeed a time of religious doctrinal unity. As discussed Chapter IV of this study, contemporary Salafists revere the righteous predecessors who lived during this formative period for their devotion to God and to the practices and teachings of the Prophet. The traditional historical account of the period reinforces the veracity of a religiously-pure umma during this important time, making the contemporary Salafist emulation of that aspect of the Rightly Guided Caliphate very understandable.

C. MAJOR DISPARITIES

Although important similarities are found between the two separate accounts of the story of the Rightly Guided Caliphate, major differences do indeed exist. The first major difference surrounds the *scope* of the individual imperfections and disagreements found amongst the period's leaders. While both accounts acknowledge that key leaders within the Salaf made mistakes and had disagreements between themselves, the contemporary Salafist narrative provided a much more forgiving analysis than the traditional historical account. This study's survey of key contemporary Salafist leaders' writings found only scant mention of misdeeds committed by the companions of the Prophet, while the traditional account mentions a good number of them. For example, Uthman's possible nepotism was only slightly hinted at by bin Baz, yet the traditional historical account contained significant discussion of Umar's harsh treatment of the Persians; the rebellious nature of A'isha, Talha, and Zubayr, as demonstrated by their withdrawal of support for Uthman in the days before his death; and the trio's subsequent rebellion against Ali.²⁶⁷ Similarly, disagreements between the companions such as those previously mentioned are highlighted by the traditional historical account because of their

²⁶⁷ Bin Baz, "The Advice of Shaykhul-Islaam Ibn Baaz," 2; Saunders, *History of Medieval Islam*, 57, 61–64; Shaban, *Islamic History*, 71.

profound impact on the caliphate, while the contemporary Salafist narrative downplays the severity and impact of any disagreements by arguing that the minor ones were caused by limited access to specific aspects of the Prophet’s Sunna and implying that the major ones were instigated by rebellious Kharijites rather than the companions themselves.²⁶⁸

The second major difference between the two accounts of the Rightly Guided Caliphate is found in the perceived *magnitude* of political divisions that existed between different factions throughout the period. This study’s review of the contemporary Salafist narrative found no mention of two watershed internal conflicts: the Wars of Apostasy and the Battle of the Camel. Both of these conflicts were extremely significant because of the level of violence that occurred and their potential to profoundly alter the trajectory of Islamic history. Though unmentioned by the contemporary Salafist narrative, traditional historical sources address both conflicts in great detail; the Wars of Apostasy are described as a critical episode that preserved the caliphate during an early existential crisis, and the Battle of the Camel is recounted as both the first outbreak of violence between companions and the first major threat to Ali’s reign as caliph—a reign that eventually ended in failure.²⁶⁹

Regarding the Rightly Guided Caliphate’s underlying political disharmony and episodic periods of strife, the differences between the two accounts this study examined are profound. While the contemporary Salafists’ reverence for the religious purity of the Salaf is completely understandable, their narrative’s omission of many of the details surrounding the worst cases of Muslim-versus-Muslim bloodshed, the willingness of some companions to direct violence against others, and the severe factionalism that existed is enormously puzzling. Moreover, the admission that key leaders within the Salaf were indeed fallible makes the omissions even more perplexing. Since contemporary Salafists imply that the fallibility of individuals did not detract from the religious purity of the Salaf as a group, the turmoil of the period could be explained as the result of human error that, despite its egregiousness, still did not invalidate the *overall*

²⁶⁸ Al-Albani, “Sacred Salafee Methodology;” Bin Baz, “The Advice of Shaykhul-Islaam Ibn Baaz,” 2, 8.

²⁶⁹ Shaban, *Islamic History*, 23, 25; Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests*, 55–56.

infallibility of this earliest Muslim generation. Viewed in this context, the blatant omission of these painful historical details suggests that contemporary Salafists are less concerned about the credibility of their account of the Salaf's religious purity than they are about how these details could undermine the amount of *temporal* power attributed to the early Islamic caliphate.

The first major omission, the Wars of Apostasy waged against the tribes that decided to secede from the Islamic state after the death of Mohammad, had far less to do with religion than the preservation of the state's temporal power. Mohammad's personal influence over these tribes was immensely strong, but their secession after his death—despite their desire to continue the practice of Islam—is indicative of the simultaneous religious unity of the umma and political factionalism of the state. Similarly, the Battle of the Camel, which pitted the companions against each other shortly after Ali's ascension to the post of caliph, was instigated by some of the Prophet's closest companions in an effort to maintain the temporal status quo. In this conflict, it was the political unity of the state, rather than the religious unity of the umma, that was called into question. While each of these violent clashes by themselves demonstrates the significant political discord that existed during the Rightly Guided Caliphate period, they represent only a small part of the greater underlying tensions that weakened the temporal strength of the state during the time. As discussed in Chapter II, the perpetual tension between the elites within the core of the state, between the core and the periphery, and between the provinces themselves continually undermined the caliphate's political unity and was barely kept in check by external conquest. It is this reverence for the temporal strength of the Rightly Guided Caliphate, and desire to return the Muslim community to a position of relevance within the world order through religious purity, that explains why these key historical aspects are omitted from the contemporary Salafists' interpretation of the period.

D. SUMMARY

This study's comparison of the historical reality of the Rightly Guided Caliphate with the contemporary Salafist narrative of the period indicates one major, underlying

reason why contemporary Salafists of every faction celebrate this brief portion of Islamic history as the one most worthy of emulation, despite the remarkable turmoil that characterized it. Much like their late nineteenth-century predecessors, contemporary Salafists want more than a *religiously-pure* Muslim society; they yearn for an Islamic domain with great *temporal* power that rivals the rest of the world, yet does not conform to secularism to obtain it. In their interpretation, the caliphate's temporal power and its umma's religious purity during this vaunted period represent everything each contemporary Salafist faction wants the Muslim world to become—albeit through different methods.

Contemporary Salafists' desire to preserve the memory of the Rightly Guided Caliphate as both a great temporal power and religiously-pure dominion, combined with their omission of many important details surrounding the factionalism and conflict that persisted during its reign, validate this study's second major hypothesis, with one slight nuance. Contemporary Salafists seek to reinvent the period in a way that better supports their religious and political objectives, but as explained in Chapter IV, they do not completely ignore *all* negative aspects of the Rightly Guided Caliphate. Instead, some negative aspects are acknowledged, but are explained in a way that reinforces the movement's key concepts, including the importance of heeding the Prophet's Sunna and the detrimental effects that innovation creates for an otherwise faithful community of believers.

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V. CONCLUSION

A. SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH CONDUCTED

Contemporary Salafism, as an extension of the modern Salafist movement that began in the late 1800s, seeks to address the decline of Muslim society relative to the West. It posits that this upsetting divergence has occurred because Muslims have strayed from the true path of Islam, which requires a strict adherence to the Qur'an and the Sunna as it was interpreted by the Prophet's companions. Consequently, the lives of the righteous Salaf—the first generation of Muslims who lived during Mohammad's time and through the Rightly Guided Caliphate period—are of paramount importance to contemporary Salafists. The period is both revered and emulated by contemporary Salafists as a model for today's Muslims to follow. Since the period was wrought with significant turmoil and violence, including the assassination of three of the four ruling caliphs, the outbreak of four bloody rebellions, continuous infighting between the Prophet's closest companions, the virtual split of the caliphate into two separate states, and the birth of the Sunni-Shi'a rift, its emulation appears to be highly illogical. This study attempts to understand the contemporary Salafist movement's paradoxical emulation of the Rightly Guided Caliphate period by examining both the traditional historical account of the period and the Salafi narrative. Through comparative analysis of the two competing accounts, this study's conclusion is that contemporary Salafists emulate the Rightly Guided Caliphate period because it represents a time of not only religious purity, which is clearly important to them, but also of unrivaled temporal power.

A detailed examination of the traditional historical account of the Rightly Guided Caliphate yielded several important insights into this highly complex period. First, on a political level, the influence of factionalism and the prevalence of group-interest posed a constant threat to the unity of the caliphate. Second, each of the four Rightly Guided Caliphs struggled to exert the level of political and religious control over the state that was necessary to maintain unity in the face of this pervading factionalism. Caliphal assertions of power were resisted—sometimes bloodily—by those who benefited from the status quo. Ironically, this violent resistance sometimes originated from the ranks of

the Prophet's closest companions. Finally, the political discord that characterized the period was offset by the religious unity of the umma. The preponderance of violence that occurred during the period resulted from conflicts over the allocation of power and influence, not over the practice of religion. Although the Rightly Guided Caliphate expanded at a seemingly miraculous pace, the political factionalism that underlined it eventually brought it to a bitter end.

A survey of the contemporary Salafist narrative of the period also yielded several major insights. First, contemporary Salafists regard the righteous Salaf, as a group, to have been infallible. This interpretation is taken directly from the Prophet himself, when he declared that his generation was the greatest of all Muslims, and is supplemented by the contemporary Salafist reflection that the companions were exceptionally knowledgeable, righteous, and devoted. Second, while the people who comprised the earliest generation of Muslims were not infallible as individuals, their transgressions and disagreements were small in scope, did not detract from the overall righteousness of the Salaf, and were caused by specific individuals' limited access to certain aspects of the Prophet's Salaf. Third, the umma was exceptionally unified during the period until deviant factions strayed from the Qur'an and Sunna by rousing rebellion that led to the assassination of Uthman and conflict between Ali and Mu'awiyah. Fourth, the rift between Sunni and Shi'a, as detestable as Salafists believe the Shi'a became, is not seen as Ali's fault. As one of the most important members of the righteous Salaf, Ali is revered by contemporary Salafists along with the other Rightly Guided Caliphs. Instead, rebellious Kharijites are blamed for opening the rift that led to the eventual divorce of Sunni and Shi'a.

This study's comparison of both competing accounts led to the conclusion that contemporary Salafists emulate the Rightly Guided Caliphate, despite the enormous turmoil that accompanied it, because they are enamored by its temporal power as much as by its religious purity. Several factors explain this conclusion. First, important details that would damage the remembrance of the Rightly Guided Caliphate as a temporal power—but not necessarily its reputation for religious purity—are omitted from the narrative. Since contemporary Salafists argue that disputes between even the most

prominent members of the Salaf did not detract from the overall religious purity of the generation, the bloody rebellions and infighting between the companions that occurred could be similarly explained. Instead, these historically painful episodes are omitted from their narrative to avoid detracting from an account of the caliphate as a politically-united and temporally-powerful entity. Since religious purity and temporal power are both essential aspects of the Rightly Guided Caliphate that contemporary Salafists point to for emulation, political factionalism doesn't fit into the narrative. Second, the contemporary Salafist goal of returning Islamic society to a position of prominence through religious purification finds an excellent example in a Rightly Guided Caliphate seen as both temporally-powerful and religiously-pure. Religious purity is really only a means to an end, and for this reason, both the political and religious strength of the caliphate is enormously appealing. Since it possessed the temporal strength to challenge its Western enemies and a religious infallibility that can never again be matched, the Rightly Guided Caliphate is revered and emulated by the contemporary Salafist movement.

B. RECOMMENDATIONS

This study's message, that the contemporary Salafist movement reveres the Rightly Guided Caliphate period for both the temporal power it epitomized and its religious purity, must not be prematurely interpreted as cause for concern. Instead, it must be understood that the movement's unique belief structure presents a number of opportunities for improved global security that Western national security professionals would be wise to take advantage of. Two major aspects of this belief structure, in particular, are noteworthy. First, while some contemporary Salafist factions are eager to employ violence to purify Muslim society and return it to predominance, many Salafists reject the practice as innovation.²⁷⁰ Indeed, several of the purist scholars surveyed in this study vehemently argued against the use of violence. This divide between Salafists who embrace the notion of purification through knowledge or political action and those who prefer the shortcut of violence must be exploited in a way that strengthens the position of

²⁷⁰ Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement,” 220.

those contemporary Salafists who seek peace while marginalizing those who do not. Cooperation with those in a unique position to undermine jihadism on ideological and religious grounds is clearly in the American national interest.

The second opportunity that can be found within the contemporary Salafist belief system is demonstrated by the growing number of Salafi political parties dedicated to legitimate, non-violent political action. The ascension of Salafi political blocs in Kuwait and Bahrain and the birth of numerous parties in post-Arab Spring Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Lebanon indicate a willingness of many Salafists to eschew their long histories of opposition to popular sovereignty and to embrace democracy as a means of governance.²⁷¹ Though young democracies are notoriously unstable—and breakdowns in their typically fragile political systems often lead to bloodshed—the contemporary Salafists' initial gravitation to politics instead of violence in the aforementioned cases is extremely reassuring.²⁷² Several promising signs are found in Egypt, particularly, where Salafi political parties have recently demonstrated a preference for peaceful dispute resolution. Salafists were deeply involved in mediation between the Morsi government and militant Sinai jihadis in 2012 and 2013 and, more recently, have urged the military to reconcile with the Muslim Brotherhood after the latter was ousted in the summer of 2013.²⁷³ Western national security professionals must exploit these peaceful overtures by encouraging contemporary Salafist political parties to stand for pluralism, dialogue, compromise, and peaceful activism.

While it is true that contemporary Salafists view the West with great suspicion, their continuing growth and expanding influence throughout several regions of the world requires that today's national security professionals refrain from oversimplifying the beliefs and composition of the movement and immediately classifying it as a threat.

²⁷¹ McCants, "Joining the Fray."

²⁷² National Intelligence Council, "Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds," Office of the Director of National Intelligence, accessed August 8, 2013, http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/globaltrends_2030.pdf, 9, 11.

²⁷³ David Kenner, "Can Salafists Save Egypt?" *Foreign Policy*, July 26, 2013, http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/07/26/can_salafists_save_egypt; Kamran Bokhari, "Salafism and Arab Democratization," StratFor, October 2, 2012, <http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/salafism-and-arab-democratization>.

Although friendship with the contemporary Salafist movement is largely an unrealistic goal, cooperation and peaceful coexistence is not. Understanding contemporary Salafists' peaceful inclinations is the first necessary step towards forging an acceptable relationship with them.

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